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THE
HIGH MILLS

BY
KATHERINE SAUNDERS

AUTHOR OF "GIDEON'S ROCK," "JOAN MERRYWEATHER," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

HENRY S. KING & Co., LONDON.
1875.

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TO
SIR ARTHUR HELPS, K.C.B.,

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED

WITH THE TRUE RESPECT AND REGARD OF
THE WRITER.

January 1, 1874.

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NOTE.

A SKETCH entitled "The High Mills" by the same author appeared some time since in "Good Words;" and although that sketch is partly incorporated with the present work, yet the stories are in no sense the same, as the latter contains nearly two-thirds more matter than the former.

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THE HIGH MILLS.

CHAPTER I.

LAMBERHURST.

“Thy people shall be my people.”

RUTH.

2 THERE is a turn in the road from Bulver's Bay to Lamberhurst from which the High Mills are first to be seen, looking like two pinned insects writhing on the hill.

It was at this turn of the road that Michael Swift first saw them at noon on the third day of March, 18—.

He stood still, his bundle on his stick, his face raised towards them, with the

look of a man seeing at last in substance and reality what had been his chief vision, awake or asleep, for years past.

It was such a look as Jacob might have cast upon the fields of Laban; Christian on the shining palaces of the Beautiful City; or Columbus towards the shores of the New World.

When he withdrew his eyes from the mills, Michael turned to look at the road by which he had come; and, dropping his bundle, took his stick and drew a thin line across the road, saying to himself with a smile as full of sorrow as tears can sometimes be of joy—"Here my life is cut in two."

On one side of the line lay Michael's thirty-two years of peaceful, honest life, all darkened now by the great sorrow which had driven him forth.

On the other remained only the High Mills and the hope which was too wild and daring to be told to any living creature,

but for the sake of which he had left all he cared for in the world.

Michael had changed his travelling clothes at the last village that he passed, and was going into Lamberhurst in his white miller's dress. He was of middle height and broad-shouldered, and possessed all the vigour and careless grace of well-used muscles and perfect health. His face, too, was broad, and always pale; and this and his dark beard and eyes gave him a slightly Eastern look, which, however, was forgotten at the first sound of his hearty English voice.

Everything he saw was as fresh to him as if he had indeed entered upon a new world, a new life. He had never before been more than twelve miles from London; and this old village in Southdownshire, where life was still much the same as it had been a century ago, was full of wonder for him.

He laughed at the fat-legged children

running into the cottages at his approach. He marvelled at the little Norman church ; at its rich black old door, guarded with rustic white gates, which would have been thought too humble for the lowest cottage in *his* village.

He went on a few steps into the churchyard, which was treeless and breezy, and where there was about one gravestone to twenty little mounds without.

“Are folks here content to be buried, name and all?” Michael wondered ; and he thought that if he grew old, and died before his hope was realized, it would be better that he too should have his name go down into the grave with him.

As he was thinking of this his eyes fell on a stone bearing many repetitions of the name “Ambray ;” and Michael no sooner saw it than his face became disturbed ; a deep reverence came over it, and he took his cap slowly and with trembling hands from his head.

The first tracing of the name was fast following the bones of its owner to decay, but Michael could just read underneath it "of Lamberhurst Hall." There was next a John Ambray, of Lamberhurst Hall, then some names which Michael passed quickly over till he came to that of a captain who had distinguished himself at Waterloo, and from this to the soldier's eldest son, Ambray, of Buckholt Farm.

As he read this name, Michael bowed his head lower, and turned quickly away, treading gently in the grass, on which his eyes were fixed with a gravity as profound as if each green blade marked some dust dear to him.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE TEAM.

“Simple folk, of simple ways,
Living by earth’s tillage ;
Spending all their quiet days
In the same old village.”

THE smell of wood fires came stronger on the fresh March breeze, and soon Michael reached the little inn by the sign of the Team, where he entered and asked for some ale.

The lad to whom he had spoken pointed into the little bar-parlour, where Michael had already seen four or five smock-frocks round a table, and a tanglement of drab-gaitered legs underneath it.

It was market-day, and the heads of several of the neighbouring farms having

gone to the town, the company in which Michael found himself was, he soon understood, composed mostly of old men who had been left at home in charge; and who had taken this opportunity of a quiet meeting and discussion of their several grievances, in the presence of the sympathizing landlord of the Team.

Michael had never seen anything like these men in his life before. They all stopped talking as he sat down at the window, and stared at him, exchanging looks with each other, then stared at him again with as little regard for what he thought of it as if he had been a stray animal wandering at large in the village.

Michael returned their gaze with more than the surprise natural to a townsman meeting farm-labourers of a remote country place for the first time. An innocent prisoner, seeing impotent age or idiocy on his judge's face might have had such a look of foreboding—almost terror—as

came into Michael's eyes at the contemplation of these creatures of his new world.

Turning away from them to the window, he saw a boy running past, then heard heavy shoes in the passage, and in an instant a little smock stood in the doorway, and a small voice, full of excitement, was shouting—

“Ma'r S'one ! The mill's agoin' ! ”

At this every one looked at a little old man at the corner of the table.

Michael looking also saw that Ma'r S'one (which he afterwards heard was a South-downshire abbreviation of Master Stone) was quite different from the rest of the company, who had impressed him so unfavourably.

Ma'r S'one was very small and gentle-looking, and seemed to be almost visibly diminishing in size, under the influence of age and toil. His tanned hand shook on his knee like a dry leaf in autumn longing to flutter down and be at rest. His

little eyes were bright, and ever ready to fill with childish surprise, or dismay, or pleasure : indeed, Ma'r S'one was very like a withered child looking gently on life as on a hard school from which he waited patiently to be sent home.

Afterwards, when Michael had much opportunity of watching him, he noticed that he never seemed quite at his ease, but appeared constantly haunted by the fear that he was not doing all that he could to please people, and might get into trouble.

No one could ever persuade Ma'r S'one that any portion of his time belonged to himself. His presence now at the Team was quite a piece of self-sacrifice, for Ma'r S'one drank nothing but water, and hated to leave his work, but he had been much too frightened at giving offence to refuse to go with those who had demanded his company. "All things to all men" was Ma'r S'one—but most innocently, and for nothing but peace.

When the boy called out that the mill was going, and every one looked at Ma'r S'one, his little eyes filled with astonishment, and gazed about helplessly. At last he fixed them on the boy, and asked—

“Be ye sure, Tum?”

“Ye'es,” answered Tom, jerking his head back to look through the outer door—“goin' a good'n! Come and look 'eself, Ma'r S'one.”

So Ma'r S'one got up, and leaning on his long-handled thud (for without some such aid he could not walk), and jerking his shoulder-blades as if he found it difficult to realize that they were not burdened with a bundle of sticks or hay, he went to the door and stood beside the boy, looking out up at the mills.

Michael watched him as he looked up with bright wondering eyes, which presently grew full of childish awe.

He came back shaking his head, and said in a trembling voice as he sat down,

“Poor old Ambray! I thart missus ’ud wuk ’im up to it—I thort she woard.”

Michael, who sat holding his mug of ale without heeding it, and looking on the floor as he listened intently, heard several grunts of sympathy; and some one asked,

“Ah! she’s been at it agen, then, eh, Ma’r S’one?”

“Ye’es,” said Ma’r S’one; “I fetched her a sheert o’ paper yest’y, and she writ to un as she must and woard let the mill, as he couldn’t wuk it ’e’self nor pay a grinder. And then she carled me in, and I see her a lickin’ it to make it steeik, and a thumpin’ it, and she scraaled the name on it and says to me, ‘Take this’ ere up to t’ High Mills, Ma’r S’one, and look shearp.’ I wur’ most afeard to go, I wur.”

“The old flint might tark her ’ead arf afore she’d got *me* to gone,” asserted a voice at the table.

Ma’r S’one looked at the speaker with the humble admiration with which a weak

little boy looks at a school-fellow of superior size, and repeated meekly—

“I wur’ most afeard to go; and when I heerd old Ambray’s cough, I thart I shud a tarned and gone down t’ hill agen; but if I had, she’d comed ’e’self. So I gived it in, and they telled me t’ bide a minute, and I heerd him fell off his cheer a coughin’ and a chokin’, and the wife wur on her knees holdin’ up his ’ead and cryin’, and says to me, ‘Go, Ma’r S’one, there’s no good to wait. Tell the missus John Ambray is old and helpless, but he has a son, and we have sent for him.’”

Michael had turned his back, and was looking up at the mills with wild eyes and white lips.

“It’s be hoped you telled her that, Ma’r S’one,” said the landlord of the Team.

“Ye’es,” answered Ma’r S’one; “she wur just arf in the caart—she and Ann Ditch—with th’ butter under ’em, and she on’y larfed when I telled her, and says—

‘Arl very fine, M’ar S’one, but la’s la’ and right’s right.’”

“But it bean’t all la’ that’s right, naythur,” said an old man sitting next to Ma’r S’one.

Michael did not stay to hear the slow and complicated dispute which followed this bold assertion, but paid for his ale, and nodding gently to Ma’r S’one as the representative of the company, wished him good morning, and went out.

Though it was but one by the Dutch clock as Michael left the Team, Lamberhurst had sunk deep into its afternoon stupor.

Time dragged such a rusty and reluctant scythe over these downs of which Michael’s new world consisted, that it is no wonder the inhabitants found it necessary to take him by the forelock to get on at all. So at three or four in the morning the working day began; and who then could wait later

than eleven for the noon, or seven or eight for night ?

Time, however, kept a strict reckoning with those who tried to beguile him in this way, and got what was due to him by stretching out the weary lives a score or so of years beyond the usual length. Sitting in the doorways, or crawling with sticks and crutches along the little passages or peering from the windows, Michael saw several of these aged debtors whom the tyrant would not suffer to depart till they had paid what they owed him to the uttermost farthing.

At the smithy, by the steep lane leading up to the High Mills, the horse that was being shod, the smith who was beating the red-hot shoe, the two men looking on, and the fire itself, with the March sunshine on it, all seemed to Michael to be more than half asleep.

The ducks about the pond apparently thought there was at this hour nothing in

water requiring the attention of more than one eye, or on land that made it worth standing on with more than one leg. The calves brought down to drink had fallen into a trance with their mouths full of water, which dribbled back into the pond, while the shadows of the overhanging catkins fell lightly on their sleek sides.

Michael Swift, as he strode through the village in his miller's clothes, every muscle and nerve of his body strung to action, and his face worn by sorrow and full of fervour, looked not unlike some white-robed messenger of fate coming with hands full of good and evil to waken this lethargic little world.

CHAPTER III.

THE HIGH MILLS.

“A millstone and the human heart are driven ever round ;
If they have nothing else to grind, they must themselves
be ground.”

LOGAU.

ALTHOUGH the lane to the High Mills was to become to Michael's feet as familiar a way as they had ever trodden, he remembered noticing nothing about it then but that it was steep and chalky, and seemed to end in a sharp line against the sky.

He had not gone far up before the wind which had lulled a few moments rose high, and suddenly he heard the grinding of the millstone and the rushing of the sails.

He had been expecting this sound ever since he set foot in the lane, listening for it,

yet it came upon him with a tumult that bewildered and staggered him.

He listened to it as one piloting a ship through perilous ways listens to the breaking of the waves upon a reef, his lips hard set, his eyes contracted, to prevent either breath or glance betraying the fear that is in him.

Michael could not keep his feet steady ; his steps wavered from side to side of the narrow road. The higher he got, the more overwhelming to him became the voice of the little mill, which as yet he could not see.

It was eloquent of things he dared not think of at this time. It filled the stark black hedges with visions of a face from which his own turned shudderingly away. It was in vain that his will strove against his imagination, which clutched at everything the mill's voice offered it : the vision of a little child laughing and clapping its hands at the sails turning merrily in the

spring breeze ; a lad's face at a mill window looking out upon the morning, flushed like itself with the hectic beauty of false promise ; —these, and many others such as these, Michael's fancy seized upon as the sound of the mill filled his ears.

At last something white came flashing up over the hill-line, and against the vivid March sky.

The tips of the mill-sails were in sight, sweeping slowly round, for the wind had sunk.

Now that Michael was so near to what he had been journeying towards for three days, the energy died out of his limbs, so that he could scarcely drag them along ; the whole journey began to appear to him a foolish and desperate thing.

He could see all the top of the mill now—the little sails opposite the great ones, and a tiny window.

A few steps more, and the whole scene he had so often pictured was before him—not

as he had pictured it, but all strange—so strange, that old thoughts, which had grown half-lovingly, half-fearfully, round Michael's picture, fled; and, before new ones had time to grow and fit themselves, there was nothing in his mind but dreariness, confusion, and a desire that was really a sharp pang after the home left—a bitter sense that the smallest thing *there*, in the place hidden from him by a three days' journey, was nearer and clearer to his perception at this moment than all which lay close before him.

He had thought of the two mills in a pleasant country field—the white one trim and orderly, and the old black mill beyond it, useless and falling to decay; but little had he imagined what kind of world they stood in—what valley, crowned with a shining little circlet of sea, lay stretched before them—green, plenteous, and so lovely as to be strange and foreign to eyes which had seen no further than Michael Swift's.

As he looked on it his eyes grew heavy and sick; like a poor soldier's which, filled with the loved face he has left behind him, are compelled to look upon the smiles and gestures of some dancing peasant girl.

But this was no time to pause and give way to the bitterness of being a stranger in the land. The wind came up from the sea, and the voice of the mill aroused him. He looked up at it. How gaunt it was and weatherworn! How impossible he found it to look at the little windows without seeing the same face at each—the fresh boyish face with eyes blue and careless—that *would* meet his and kindle with tragic prophecy as they gazed at him.

Suddenly a real face appeared at the little square window of the grinding floor. Not the face that had been haunting Michael since the mill had been in hearing and in sight. This face was aged, long, white, and stern, and with no colour in it but the cold steel-grey eyes which looked out beyond

where Michael Swift was standing right on to where the road from Bulver's Bay curved low among the downs.

Michael understood well the meaning of the look, and moved aside, because he could not bear to stand, even unseen, between it and its quest.

In moving he went towards the mill, which was going now with a velocity that reminded him how unfit perhaps to regulate its speed were the hands trying so feverishly to save and keep it from passing away from them.

At this thought Michael lifted his head and pressed on towards the mill door, with a tender pity in his face like one who hastens to the assistance of a child in distress or danger.

He went straight and opened the door, but when he stood inside among the sacks of flour, with the name of Ambray on them, and saw some feet coming down the little ladder from the dressing-floor, his confusion

and dizziness came back, and he scarcely knew how he should face the tall white figure that was coming slowly down to him.

He was holding his hand to his side, and coughing as he came ; though Michael saw this rather than heard it because of the din of the grindstone, which drowned every other sound.

His grey eyes were fixed on Michael, whom he had seen approaching, and had come down to meet. He was very tall, and still upright in spite of his illness, which had left him white as the deal shaft he held by as he stood still at the foot of the steps. Michael could not tell if his hair was really white, for it was covered with flour, as were his eyebrows and lashes.

Michael could not speak ; he moistened his lips and moved them, but no sound came through the noise of the grindstone.

The long ghostly figure holding by the shaft and coughing his painful and, as it seemed, silent cough, began to wonder at

him, and the grey eyes to gather some impatient fire.

“The—the master?” Michael said at last, with a voice which he felt might ruin him, but which the miller thought strong and pleasant enough.

He nodded sharply, and Michael’s hand went to his cap. Then the old man shouted above the din—

“And servant too.” And at this Michael took his cap right off and held it in his hand.

The miller stared at him, but not so sternly; for respect is sweet to those who have had it, and lost, or think that they have lost it.

The wind was gentler now, and Michael had no trouble in hearing his own voice and making it heard when he said—

“I heard you were without a grinder, and I have come to offer myself.”

The old miller looked at him in a way that made Michael’s heart beat high with hope.

This was not because he saw in that look the least intention on the miller's part of engaging a grinder,—he knew well nothing was further from him than any such purpose ; but Michael could see that his proposal had disturbed the old man with what he himself felt to be a vain desire for that which he must refuse.

Michael knew that as he looked at him he was considering his strength, and hopelessly longing that it might have been in his power to use it for the saving of the mill ; he knew that he was thinking of the services he offered, and coveting them with all his soul, and with all his poor weary body that longed to give up struggling against its chains of pain, and lie down to lessen their weight.

Reading all this with those simple, clear-seeing eyes of his, Michael did not despair when the miller said—

“I am not in need of a grinder. Who told you I was? I do not employ one.

I manage the stone and everything myself."

"So I heard," answered Michael, avoiding the haggard eye, and fixing his own on the name on a flour sack against the great scales. "But I heard, too, that there was like to be some change in your arrangements just now."

Ambray coughed painfully. The thought of what the change might be—the giving up of the mill—had made him tremble as he stood.

"No," he answered shortly. "No change that will make me engage a grinder."

"This person that was talking to me about it," said Michael, "was thinking you were likely to be making a fresh start altogether to put a stop to some change that was talked of about the mill. I don't know the rights of it exactly; but this friend of mine was saying that he was sure you would see that it would be the best thing you could do now to hire a grinder at once."

The miller gave Michael a bewildered and an astonished look, then bent his white brows in thought—painful and puzzled.

“No,” he said at last, looking up with decision; “I don’t think of doing any such thing.”

Michael took his cap from under his arm, but instead of putting it on, as Ambray expected to see him do, turned it about in his hands thoughtfully.

“You’ll excuse me,” he began, looking up suddenly at the tall old miller, “if I take the liberty of mentioning that I know you couldn’t—I mean that it would make no difference to me putting off the matter of wages for a few weeks or so.”

Old Ambray did not answer, but stood looking at him through and through.

“Now,” thought Michael, “he thinks I have got into some scrape, and want to earn a character at his expense.”

He put his hand into his pocket, and taking out a little old leather case, drew from that a paper which he gave to Ambray.

This was the written character Michael Swift had received from the manager of some mills he had worked at for five years.

“What is this?” asked Ambray, opening it as he spoke.

“I should like you to look at it,” answered Michael, “in case you change your mind.”

The miller read it through and returned the paper to Michael, repressing a sigh as he did so.

“Yes,” he said, looking at him with more interest. “These are good lines—very good lines. You ought to get a good thing from these. These are famous mills too—I have heard of them. My son—I have a son in London—wrote to me about them.”

Michael never afterwards understood what impelled him to look up at that instant, and meet the miller’s eye, and give that little answering nod as the old man said, “I have a son in London.” He has often felt it since to be one of the greatest sins he ever committed.

While Michael was hanging his head and suffering over this little involuntary act, Ambray was regarding him with a certain wistfulness in his wan eyes, and asking himself—

“What does he mean—this well-to-do-looking fellow, with his good lines, coming to *my* mill when he might go anywhere? I take it he is not quite sharp.”

Then he thought—

“Perhaps he has come to Southdownshire to see after some important place that will take some weeks to settle about, and only wants to fill up the time.” And here Michael saw that he again began thinking how well it would be for him if he could by any possibility agree to his proposal.

“Why have you come down here, so far from where you worked before?” inquired Ambray suddenly.

If Michael was for a moment at a loss for a reply, the miller did not perceive it, for his cough came on through his having spoken

more quickly than Michael had yet heard him speak ; and by the time the fit was over Ambray was conscious of having received a simple and satisfying reason for Michael's presence at Lamberhurst. It was something about his having half arranged to engage himself at a steam-mill near Bulver's Bay, but that finding there would be more night-work than he cared to undertake, he had given up the idea altogether.

The fit of coughing had so exhausted and depressed Ambray, that, sinking on the sack of bran Michael had pushed near to him, he fell into a fit of gloomy thought, and appeared to forget Michael's presence, and to remember nothing but his weakness and the many troubles that lay so heavily upon him.

The sunshine streamed in under the door and through the little window all clogged with flour as with an indoor snow, and to make the mimicry of winter more complete, a robin came and clung to the window-

frame, pressing its scarlet breast against it in its efforts to peck at a flake of bran sticking to the inside of the window.

The old black mill-dog got up from the corner, where he had been eyeing Michael ever since he entered, and came and licked his hand with a glance of stolid and decided friendliness.

As Michael patted him, the feeling that he should stay took hold of him very strongly.

At this moment a little bell high up in the mill began to ring with a weak tinkling sound that was scarcely heard above the other noise. It was the bell that was struck by the machinery when there was no more corn in the shoot over the grindstone.

Michael, having been used to the same arrangement in the mills where he worked, was half-way up the steps before he remembered where he was.

He paused and looked back hesitatingly.

"Where are you going?" asked Ambray, gruffly.

"There's the child crying, as we call it in our mills," answered Michael with a smile; "shan't I go and feed it?"

"Let it cry," Ambray said, beginning to cough; "leave it alone."

Michael paused on the ladder with brows lifted in surprise.

"Isn't that a pity?" he remonstrated; "the wind's getting steady now. I shall find some corn on the shooting-floor, shan't I? I'm a good nurse, master; I can't bear to hear the child cry and not go and feed it. I shall find my way."

"Let it cry, I tell you," shouted Ambray, "and come down with you." As Michael obeyed, the old man, touched perhaps by the gentleness of his steps and look, added bitterly—

"Let it cry. Let it be hungry. Let it starve. I have no more to feed it with. No, there's no corn on the shooting-floor,

there is no corn in the mill. Be off, my man. I like you, but you've come to the wrong shop. Go your way with your good lines, and better luck attend you."

CHAPTER IV.

MICHAEL'S PROPOSAL.

“This will is in mine heart, and aye shall be,
No length of time nor death shall this deface,
Nor change my courage to another place.”

CHAUCER.

IN his heart the old miller did not take it ill that Michael, instead of obeying him, remained standing by the ladder; looking as if all the shame of the confession lay with him for having been the means of bringing it out.

“I won’t deceive you, master,” he said at last; “I guessed something of this before.”

“Then why the—then, what do you mean by wanting to be my grinder?”

“Why not?” said Michael. “For one thing, I don’t take all I pick up here and there for gospel truth, ’specially in the country, where folk must have something to keep them from stagnating. And then, too, the thought came to me, that perhaps if this lady that owns the mill and sells you the corn, if she heard you’d a good, strong, steady-going sort of grinder, she might be willing to leave things as they are a little longer, to give us a trial.”

The miller mused over this profoundly, and studied Michael from head to foot.

“I thought that was her reason for wishing to put the mill in other hands, your keeping no man, and—and not having good health yourself?” Michael ventured to add, after a silence of some moments.

“Reason—*her* reason!” said Ambray, with a wrathful light gathering in his eyes. “It’s no use going into that. The truth is, the woman wants to get the thing out of my hands altogether, if she can—if she can.”

But while I keep the mill in use, I have a sort of right to it: but that's nothing to do with you. As for what you say, I don't know but what there's something in it—in fact, I do see something in it.”

He sat thinking, pressing the fingers of either hand to his temples, which Michael could see were still throbbing with the agitation of his last coughing fit.

“Well,” he said, rising up to his full height, and taking hold of the shaft, “there can be no harm done by trying what you have proposed—it's not a bad proposal—not at all. I can't see the woman to-day; she's never home till late on market-days, and if she were,” he added to himself reflectively, “it's a chance if she'd be sober. No; we'll go in the morning,—that's if you really think you care to waste your time over the experiment.”

“Why, what can I do better?” answered Michael, trying to speak only cheerfully, and to conceal his deep thankfulness.

"I can give you a good bed," said Ambray, with the faded light of a bygone hospitality in his eyes. "And, though there's no corn in the mill, there's bread in the house. Come—come home and see my wife."

Michael's eyes fell with a reluctant look. Then, as if a thought had suddenly come to his assistance, he glanced round the little room and shrugged his shoulders.

"It seems to me, master, the mistress would do right to send me back with a box on the ear if I leave such a place as this," he protested. "Look how that window is choked up—the brush must go to work here at once, or we shan't be able to see one pollard from another soon, or bran from sharps."

"Nonsense," grumbled Ambray, who did not like being opposed, and whose cough was aggravated by Michael's brush filling the air with white dust. "I'm going home to tea. You'd better come too."

Michael made a grimace.

"Tea, master?" he remonstrated, "before three o'clock! Come now, you must have a little patience with me. I shall get used to your country hours all in good time, and turn the day upside down as well as any of you. I've no doubt in a week or two you'll find me quite ready to spring up like a lark—no, I mean like a nightingale when the sun sets, and go to bed when the lark gets up. But who *can* be reformed all at once?"

"Have your own way, then," answered the miller, a smile playing for an instant on his thin white lips as Michael held open the door for him.

CHAPTER V.

THE NAMES ON THE BIN.

“ Yet less of sorrow lives in me
For days of happy commune dead ;
Less yearning for the friendship fled,
Than some strong bond which is to be.”

TENNYSON.

LIKE some churchyard ghost, Michael thought, that had gone wandering abroad at midnight and been overtaken by the sunshine before it had found its way back to the grave, the figure of the miller, tall and white, passed slowly across the corner of the sunny field.

He stood with the door in his hands for some moments looking after him with a gaze that had in it the tenderness of a child, the awe of a slave.

Then he shut the door gently, as gently and reluctantly as if some bright form, soft, odour-breathing, and lovely, had just floated out, and he feared that the edges of a silken train might still be lingering on the threshold.

With his thumb upon the latch, he turned and looked around him, and up the little steps, and slowly realized that he was alone in the mill.

He realized that he was alone ; and yet his eyes began immediately to look and turn slowly or quickly as eyes that are riveted on the movements of some person or thing whose presence causes restlessness and fear.

The invisible object of Michael's gaze was felt by him to be anything but ghostly. The face and form that he felt living and moving about the mill were full of vigour and youth, and indeed it was the richness and fulness of life in his spectre that made it the more terrible to him. Many times he had the sense of hearing a clear strong

whistle, or a snatch of song in a rich, young voice that seemed now in the room where he was ; now above in the upper floors ; and now upon the steps. .

When at last Michael's gay and busy ghost seemed to have passed up these steps, and to be moving about the dressing floor over his head, he could not keep himself from following.

Ascending the steps slowly, he reached this place, and gazed through the dusty glass door into the tiny closet that served as an office.

There was a little white coat which Michael knew could never have belonged to old Ambray hanging up here ; and nailed against the wall he saw a tiny common looking-glass which he was sure was never hung there by the grim old miller.

Turning from the office, he was passing along by the great flour-bin in the middle of the room, when he saw on it, in a patch of sunshine, a confused mass of sketches and

scribbling. The sketches were mostly of windmills, and all seemed to have been done by the same hand, which had evidently been possessed by a restless ambition to improve upon its first childish sketch of a windmill. In the top sketch it seemed to have fulfilled its desires, for a fantastic frame was pencilled round it, and just inside the frame was written, in a hand bold and flowing, "George Ambray."

The scribbling among the windmills consisted only of repetitions of the same name and a few dates and obscure records ; but a little on one side two names were carved on the wood with a penknife, and a date, the 1st of March, two years back, was cut beside them. Michael's eye was caught by this date instantly, and he drew in his breath as he saw it, and then stood gazing on it and on the names, "George" and "Nora," till the light and life seemed first to die out of his eyes, then to flash back strong and moist, as he looked with an almost passionate

sympathy at the spot where the cutting of the names, and the parting, which he knew by the date that followed it, had taken place.

So absorbed was he in this scene of two years ago that he behaved exactly as he might have done had it been taking place before his eyes. He watched the remembered, or the imagined, "George" and "Nora" across the room, and even went to look down the steps after them, and hurried to the window to see them go across the field. While standing there he heard the door opened below, and the old miller's voice calling him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MILLER CONFIDES IN MICHAEL.

“Oh, sir, to wilful men,
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters.”

SHAKSPEARE.

MICHAEL started, then hurried to the ladder, but before descending it he stood still, and passed his hand across his face, and drew two or three deep breaths.

He came down at last whistling carelessly, so that Ambray should think he had not heard himself called.

“You’re soon back, then, master,” he cried with pretended surprise.

“Yes,” answered Ambray, sitting down on the sack of bran again and sighing

heavily. "I've been speaking to my wife about this, and she thinks a deal of it. I only hope she won't think too much of it," he added in a lower voice. "But she thinks we ought to see the woman to-night about it, if that's anyway possible."

"Is that wise," asked Michael, with a comical look of fright and awe, "if, as I think you did say, the lady sometimes gets a little—a little over-excited on market days?"

"Hold your tongue with your 'lady,'" cried Ambray; "a pretty 'lady'!"

"Is she now?" said Michael, with affected simplicity.

"You'll see for yourself," answered the miller, half savagely, half amused.

As Michael stood waiting further orders, Ambray startled him by saying suddenly—

"Didn't you know, then, that my brother, Mark Ambray, married a hop-picker?"

"Me! I know nothing," stammered

Michael confusedly. "I am quite a stranger here."

"Yes," growled the old miller, fixing on him eyes chilled and hardened by a life-long disappointment, "he did, sure enough, and was killed at five-and-twenty, out a hunting. He was a gentleman, was Mark Ambray. Ah, you wouldn't take me for his brother if you'd seen him. Yes, he was taken when he little expected it, and then everything was hers; and she kept everything, the High Mills and all, though she had a paper that only wanted his name, making them over to me. Years ago she'd have liked to turn me out, but she daren't, for the whole country-side would have been upon her. Besides, the mill did well; she couldn't have had it better filled, she knew that. But she's trying it on now. Yes, and the Lord knows where she'll stop."

"She's a rich woman too, I hear," said Michael.

“Rich! Why, my brother when he married her had Buckholt Farm down there where she lives now, and scrapes her gains together, and plays the miser, and clacks her tongue from morn till night. He had the farm and mills—the old black one went too then—and half the church tithes, and some hop-gardens over at Tidhurst besides; then she married Moon, a retired chandler from Bulver’s Bay—pretty comfortable off—in fact, there’s no telling exactly what he did have.”

“But I thought she was a widow?” said Michael.

“So she is; Moon isn’t in your way if you think of making yourself agreeable to her to-morrow, or to-night. He was taken off by dropsy twelve years ago.”

“Ah!” answered Michael, laughing and shaking his head. “There might be more of money-moon than honey-moon in that.”

The smallest of jokes went a long way in Lamberhurst, and if there ever was a

man who found a joke at the expense of the enemy of his life unpalatable, old Ambray was not that man. It warmed his heart towards Michael to see him laugh now, even more than the good lines he had thought so much of. He laughed till his old disease, as if enraged at seeing another power usurp its place in the poor old frame, drove off his mirth with a hard fit of coughing.

But when this was over he looked at Michael with a large and hearty liking.

“Come,” he said, “I feel like a man who has been giving his guest nothing but bad wine when he’s still some of the right stuff in his cellar. Things are not so bad as they seem at High Mills, Michael Swift. I shouldn’t have borne what I have if I hadn’t had good reasons for patience. I have nothing to look to for myself, but I don’t care for that—what’s life to me now? The grain is ground, and the meal sorted, the flour taken away, and the bran left.

No, I am nothing to myself now, nothing but an ache and a burden. God knows what the world would be to me if I hadn't my boy to think of, and if I couldn't look forward to a better lot for him than mine's been. But it's something to hope and live for to see all that belonged to my father come back to my son doubled, ay, more than doubled. That's what I live for, Michael Swift; that's the wind *my* sails are set to."

He looked up at Michael to see if he was as much impressed as he intended him to be. He was satisfied, and it struck him vaguely at the same time that he was about ten years older than he had first thought him.

Michael was leaning on the bran-bin, resting his elbow upon it, and holding his beard and lower lip crushed in his hand, while his eyes were fixed on Ambray. He felt that they were very haggard, but he dared not move them from the miller's face.

“*How* old did you say you were?” asked Ambray with a kindly interest.

Michael had not mentioned his age at all as yet, and in his confusion now it occurred to him he had better tell a falsehood about it. But it lay like a piece of lead on his tongue, and he could not get it out. He ended this little struggle by saying,

“I am only thirty-two, master, but five years of millering——”

“Takes ten of life,” Ambray finished for him. “I often think that Miller of the Dee they sing about—a water miller, of course—must have been blessed with uncommon good lungs to have worked and sung from morn till night, as they say he did. I know I’ve found the work enough for mine without the singing.”

He was silent a moment or two, then began in a troubled voice—

“I don’t know whether I’m glad or sorry that my son gave it up. It seemed a sin

to keep him at it when there was every prospect of his taking the upper hand at Buckholt Farm in a year or two; but since things have gone so contrary lately, I have doubted a good deal whether I did right in not keeping him to the mill. Well, I was telling you how the land lies between my sister-in-law and us. It's this way. I had a brother besides Mark, her husband, and he died and left his little girl with us quite unprovided for. Mark took her, and, for a wonder, his wife made as much of her as if she'd been their own; and when Mark was killed, and his wife married again, little Nora was sent to a good school at Bulver's Bay. When Moon died, the little thing was had home again, and her aunt soon let it be known that she was to have everything. Well, George, that's my boy—well, he and Nora were always together—it didn't matter to them whose ground they were on. There was never a day without

her being over at the Mill, and he had the run of the farm, with his aunt's leave or without it. They were as headstrong a pair of children as ever lived, and when they were grown up and chose to say they were engaged, Moon couldn't help herself; *she* knew Nora, and so, having to choose between taking the pair or losing 'em, she agreed to it. I often think she only did so because she thought that was the most likely way to make the girl change her mind; for she's a deep one, Jane Moon is. As for my George, she'd care little about breaking *his* heart, but Nora she *is* tender over; in fact, she's the only creature she ever had a liking for in her life."

Michael now roused himself and began to put some sacks up together against the wall, but seeing that Ambray looked at him with a frown of impatience and annoyance on his pale face, he came back to the bin, and again leaned on it in an attitude of respectful attention. As a

punishment for what he considered Michael's lack of proper interest in his affairs, Ambray remained silent.

"Does Miss Ambray live at the farm?" Michael at last ventured to ask very humbly.

"She does and she doesn't," the miller answered. "It's her real home, I suppose, but she's sought after so much that she's away a great deal visiting here and there. She's been staying this six weeks—ah, more than that, pretty near all the winter—over at the Bay, at old General Millwood's, at Stone Crouch. He was an ensign of nineteen when he fought at Waterloo with her grandfather, who was over sixty then. The young people at Stone Crouch are mighty fond of Miss Nora. Money—money, what can't it do? Why, my wife was a head taller than her, and the prettiest girl in Lamberhurst, and nobody ever made *me* jealous. But, Nora—ah, what a fool that boy of mine is!

Not but what *she* worships the very ground he's trodden on. Why, she never missed a day all this winter riding over to ask if we'd heard from him—till the last few weeks she's got tired, and no wonder! no wonder!"

Michael, with his brow on his hand and his elbow resting on the bin, held his breath at this silence, for he knew what would come after it—the burst of pain and anger that had been so long restrained.

It came, and Michael's form so shuddered under it that the old padlock hanging loosely to the bin shook and rattled.

"Ah, Michael Swift," the miller cried, lifting up his head with a kind of proud abandonment to shame and grief, "my son is using us very badly, very wickedly! Ah, what I have done for that boy! what I have gone through for his sake the God I have thought less of than him, only knows! He fancied himself an artist, and nothing would do but he

must go to London and study; and we two old fools, his mother and me, of course we must set *his* opinion against all the world's, and get him his way by pinching and begging, and by hook and by crook. Two years he's been away now, and only troubled himself to come home once. Four letters I've written to tell him how Jane Moon is treating us, and not a line have I had except an answer to the first to say he couldn't come, and some hint about breaking off his engagement with Nora, but that was temper—a sort of threat to me, and the girl shall never hear of it. He didn't want to hurry himself home, that's all, and show his temper in that way. It was a sort of a warning to us not to thwart him, I believe. Jane Moon was in high glee, the cat! and thinks Nora well rid of him, and tries to starve us out of the mill, out of the parish, out of the girl's sight; and I write to George

and tell him all this, and he—he stays on, making game of us, no doubt, with his fine artist friends. But he'll punish himself soon. He can't last out long without money, that's my comfort. He'll have to suffer in the long run, and punish himself. He'll be humble enough when he's in want again, though he *was* too proud to have his old father and mother up to London to see him, as they offered when times weren't so bad. Ah, that was the first blow, that was. 'He was among friends,' he said. *Friends*, the young scamp! What friends had he such as us? 'He had no means of making us comfortable.' *Comfortable*, the young hypocrite! Ah, hasn't he done that?"

A long fit of coughing followed Ambray's bitter and prolonged outburst. Michael remained bent over the bin, motionless and mute.

The miller said nothing, but he could not help feeling surprise and disappointment at his silence.

He thought he had secured a good-natured, sympathetic listener, who would be almost certain to defend his son, and so give him the sweetest comfort that, in George's absence, the world could afford him.

He got up from his seat on the bransack in an ill-humour as soon as his cough was quieted, and told Michael to shut up the mill and go round to Buckholt Farm to inquire what time Mrs. Moon was expected home.

Michael rose and came and opened the door for him. Ambray pulled his coat collar high up round his neck and passed him sulkily, without looking in his face. For this, when he was gone, Michael sighed with a great thankfulness and relief.

When he had shut himself in again, he leant his back against the door, and stood looking down with the expression of one who felt himself to be contending

in his mind against some unreasonable misery.

He stood so for several moments; then went to where the light streamed in at the little window, and looked up at it. Here a look of comfort and faint triumph came into his eye, and he said softly—

“ Oh, George, boy, if *you* could speak for me, you would! ”

CHAPTER VII.

EVENING.

“ Comes, from the road-side inn caught up,
A brawl of crowded laughter,
Thro’ falling brooks, and cawing rooks,
And a fiddle scrambling after.”

LEICESTER WARREN.

MICHAEL went about his work of shutting up very quietly, and with a calmer manner than he had yet had since he entered the mill.

He appeared to treat almost with reverence every little duty that came to his hand.

The old dog followed him from floor to floor; the setting sun streamed warmly through and through the mill.

Michael, though he dared not yet look back and wonder what they were all doing at home, began to feel less strange and chill at heart.

He did not care yet to look far out over the downs when he went to shut the doors leading on to the little terrace, for fear his thoughts should be driven by force of contrast to the dear old green at home.

He only took one vague, sweeping glance over all—the sketches of light and shadow; the little line of sea; the mills on the far-away heights laying their sails like weary wings at rest against the sky; the White Lane up from the smithy where a party of riders were waiting, their voices ascending in a pleasant murmur with the ring of the blacksmith's hammer, the sound of rough laughter and music from the "Team," and the tinkling of a sheep-bell in the mill-field.

Michael had locked both doors, and was going down the ladder to the next floor

with his gentle, noiseless step, when all at once he stood still, and put up his hand to shade his eyes from the sun that streamed towards him. His other hand was still holding by the upper floor, and his eyes full of self-doubt and amazement were looking towards the great bin.

He knew that the mill must for him be incessantly haunted by forms and voices of the past, and for a moment or two he could scarcely feel sure whether he was looking at a phantom of his brain or a reality.

The object of his doubt was a girl in a riding habit, standing by the bin with her back towards Michael, and looking at George Ambray's sketches and the two names carved there.

Michael had barely time to say to himself, "I am not dreaming—it *is* a lady," before she bent her head and touched the names with her lips, then glided to the steps, and, without Michael having seen her face,

vanished down them as if her feet had been used to them from childhood.

And they had been used to them from childhood, Michael was sure, for he knew that this was Nora.

CHAPTER VIII.

GEORGE'S HOME.

“To have received no tidings of an only child—
To have despair'd, have hoped, believed,
And be for evermore beguiled.”

WORDSWORTH.

MICHAEL had not to find his way to Buckholt Farm that evening. He had only just come into the road out of the White Lane when he saw a party of tipsy labourers on their way home from the Team, and Ma'r S'one was amongst them, himself perfectly sober and gentle, and looking the meekest and sweetest-tempered of victims.

On being drawn away and questioned by Michael, Ma'r S'one said he was sure his mistress would not be home till late, as he

knew she was going to take tea with an aunt of her second husband's, who kept a draper's shop at the Bay.

So Michael wished Ma'r S'one good-night, and went back up the lane.

It was with a dreary feeling that he remembered he did not even know where the miller's house was, and should be obliged to ask his way to it.

He had seen Ambray when he left the mill go down a slope at the corner of the field, and he went on in that direction till he came to some cottages, which he would have fancied only the poorest farm-labourers lived in, till at the garden gate of one he saw the miller standing, evidently looking out for him.

He seemed disappointed at the result of Michael's inquiries; but, after one impatient exclamation, he led the way quietly into the cottage, saying to Michael as he appeared at the door—

“Here's my wife—crying, you see—fit to

break her heart because Miss Nora Ambray has just paid us a flying visit."

Michael stood with his cap in his hand, trying his utmost not to look at a large portrait over the mantelpiece, which he could not help seeing wherever he turned, though as yet he had not lifted his eyes towards it.

Mrs. Ambray's was a clear-cut, beautiful old face, noble with shadows of other griefs than her own. When Michael at last found courage to look at it, he saw so much more there than the likeness to another face which he had feared to see, that he felt full of pleasure when it smiled at him, and a voice, as like that face as could be, bade him come near to the fire.

The whole of that first evening at Ambray's house was like a dream to Michael. He can only recall the two voices talking at intervals—and that the talk was all George Ambray, Nora, and the chances of gaining the desired end from Mrs. Moon in the morning.

He understood well that evening what the old people were to each other. The miller's wife was to him no wife now except in name, but only the mother of his boy, in whom his very soul was bound up. He could remember and respect her sorrow on her son's account, but in everything else he slighted and ignored her.

With her the case was exactly opposite—there was much more of the wife than the mother in her—she sorrowed over George, but chiefly on account of the grief he was causing his father, whose every look and movement Michael saw she watched with a young, suffering, loving heart in her old eyes.

He seemed to understand them both so well, that he could scarcely believe he had not known and watched them many years, instead of a few hours.

When it was late on in the evening Michael was startled by Ambray saying suddenly—

“Esther, get the Bible and read me that about the prodigal son.”

A shade passed over Mrs. Ambray's clear face, perhaps it was disappointment, almost jealousy; for she had been for some time attending to his comforts and had thought that he was regarding her with some gratitude and tenderness.

She obeyed him, but began to cry before she was half way through the story, and Ambray took the book from her and himself read it aloud.

As he read, his harsh, weak voice grew stronger—it became almost sweet—his fine eye lit, and filled.

He finished—then looked back over the page and laid the book down.

When he turned again to the fire there were stains in the white dust on his cheeks, and he smiled on Michael as he said—

“It is different with *my* prodigal. It is I who must go and eat the husks to-morrow, and abase myself for his sake.”

Michael said not a word, but bent down very low to pick up a brand that had fallen from the fire.

They put him in George's room which was, fortunately, on the ground floor, for he found it impossible to remain there two minutes, though it was all white and pink, and as sweet as an orchard in bloom.

The old latticed window was easy to escape from, and Michael was soon out alone in his new world of downs, all bathed now in the whiteness and strangeness of moonlight.

He wandered till he was weary beyond the sense of weariness—living through all the day again and again in his restless thoughts.

At last he stood close under the mill, saying with mute lips—

“The Lord visit thee with good winds, little mill, and I'll grind it out. It was no crime—but I'll grind it out.”

CHAPTER IX.

MORNING.

“And fyry Phebus ryseth up so bright,
That al the orient laugheth of the light.”

CHAUCER.

MICHAEL slept in the mill that night, and in the morning stood at one of the little windows and saw the sun rise.

It was a sight to which he was well accustomed, and for which he had spared a few moments nearly every day throughout his busy life.

Whether it ever enriched his mind with one poetic thought is not known, for Michael never had the good fortune to be acquainted with any one to whom he could have ventured to impart such a thought,

had it been his ; and for expressing it on paper, he had never either time, opportunity, or inclination.

But it is certain that Michael *felt* nature, rather than thought about it ; that he enjoyed, rather than studied it.

He had, too, a feeling, that for a man to take no notice of the grand changes on the face of the universe in which he is as but a grain of dust, was to render himself still more utterly dust-like, helpless, and insignificant. So he laid a sort of honest human claim on everything in nature that was great, mysterious, or wonderful. "Where would be his share in these things after death," Michael vaguely asked himself, "if he did not feel, acknowledge, and claim it now, when his eye was clear and his mind sound?"

There were certain times when Michael's work, to which he ordinarily gave such patience and devotion, would suddenly become to him insignificant as the labours of the ant.

His old father had often been amazed and irritated beyond measure that so rational and manly a son as Michael was in most respects, should still be absurd enough to run out on the green and lift his black beard above a crowd of dimpled, infantine chins ; to stare at a rainbow ; or hold the mill-sails idle on a breezy May evening, to catch the first notes of a nightingale.

When the light of his first morning at Southdownshire dawned about the High Mills, Michael rose from his bed of sacks and went upstairs to a window, a mere square hole, which his face nearly filled.

He had better have gone about his work, for this was positively the first time he had beheld the sunrise on any scene but one.

On the two nights of his journey he had been weary, and had risen late. So now he found that the daybreak on these strange fields was not a thing likely to refresh and strengthen him for his morning's work, which he greatly dreaded. It was like an

old tune with new words in a foreign language, the music was sweet, but the sense, strange, unsatisfying to the thoughts the music created.

The rose and opal lights, the faint cock-crowing, the fresh bird voices,—these, indeed, made one part of the morning: but where was the other and dearer part,—the familiar sounds of his old home as it began to waken and stir; the familiar sights dawning so pleasantly on his eyes?

The downs shone like emeralds, and the flocks upon them were very plentiful; but the half-bald green at home, and the two veteran horses retired thereon for the rest of their natural (or unnatural) lives (as it might please the village boys), these were the pastures and the flocks of Michael's heart.

The little circlet of sea at the end of the valley glittered as no jewel but that one mighty gem of magnitude and depth in its setting of earth and sky *can* glitter;

and the sails of the channel fleet flecked it as the flocks did the meadows.

A gallant sight for so true an Englishman as Michael: yet as he looked at it, the puny waves of the old pond at home swelled in his memory till they washed all else away, and brought the paper boats of his little brother to make the channel fleet fly before them.

The sadness of his state of exile was on him, and Michael was obliged to hang his head and own that, grain of human dust as he called himself, the story of that grain was more to him than the story of all creation—the span of its actual existence larger to him than eternity.

Self-pity, however, was a thing of which Michael possessed a very small share indeed; and he no sooner felt it gaining dominion over him than he turned upon himself with a great contempt, and mocked and laughed at himself right heartily.

Mrs. Ambray, when she came to call him to breakfast, thought he was frowning and growling at his work instead of at himself, and said,

“Well, poor John has let the mill get in a state; it’s no wonder the man’s put out about it.”

He did not at first see her, and she had to call him twice.

“Michael Swift! Mi—chael!”

She had come up the ladder till she was able to see into the room where Michael was brushing out the grooves of the great wheel.

In an instant his face, all brightness and gentleness, was leaning out of the wheel towards her.

Mrs. Ambray had of late years acquired a cold and stony manner towards every one but her husband, George, and Nora. She had little complaint herself to make against the world, but as these three had much, she had grown into a habit of

hardening her sweet old face and voice against it.

But this morning she could not help smiling at Michael, and speaking kindly as she said—

“Come—if you’ve been at work long like this, I should say you’re wanting your breakfast.”

Michael was too vividly reminded of another dear old face and voice that used to come up the mill at home, and call him, to be able to answer this.

He crept gently down after her, and as they went out into the warm and dewy field, asked her how the master was this morning.

They were walking side by side, and Michael watched the grief come into her face with a strong compassion as she answered—

“Bad—very bad; but can we wonder? It was enough to kill him yesterday.”

When they were come into the cottage,

Michael saw the breakfast was but for two.

“What!” he exclaimed; “is the master unable to get up, then?”

Mrs. Ambray bowed her head with a stately resignation.

“He has tried many times,” she said, “but the cough takes his breath as he takes his clothes, and I’ve persuaded him to give up the strife for an hour or so, and lie still.”

Mrs. Ambray had as grave a companion at her sad breakfast as she could wish.

Michael was trying to look steadily at the prospect of the old miller giving up the strife for ever instead of for an hour, and was finding his own life utterly destitute of aim or hope at such a prospect.

Guessing nothing of these thoughts, Mrs. Ambray began to be surprised and touched by the sadness of his face, and to wonder about it.

“You’ve had a bit of trouble in your life,

my man," she said in the tone of one making at the same time a statement and an inquiry.

"Trouble—hah!"

It was half a laugh, half a cry, that broke from Michael, and that shook him as he raised his eyes to hers—part relieved, and part frightened by showing her one glimpse of a misery so wild as to cause her to start up and lay her hand tremblingly on his shoulder.

"Bless the poor fellow, what is it?" she cried; "you've had some great loss just now. Ah, is that it? Your mother, perhaps?"

Michael shook his head, with a tender gratitude that seemed to say, "No, thank God, not her."

"Your father, then?"

"No," he answered gently and with the same look.

"Not your wife—sure—you are not married?"

“No.”

“Some one p'raps that you—that would have been your wife.”

Michael felt the rush of grief and despair which had come over him at her first words of kindness subside suddenly, and give place to alarm at what these questions and these answers, simple as they were, might lead to.

His first impulse was to shake his head as he had done before at each question, but he resisted it, and only bent his head, and taking the kind hand from his shoulder, he said with a heightened colour and an awkward laugh—

“Ah, trust you women for getting at a secret!”

“I am right, then ; poor fellow! Ah, what a world it is!”

“It is,” cried Michael, with savageness, dashing one clenched hand against the palm of the other. “Oh yes, it *is* a world—of liars.”

At this moment a faint voice called—

“Esther!” and she was gone instantly.

“And I am the greatest of them all,” Michael muttered as she closed the door.

He was in a rage with himself; he could not sit still; he got up and tramped about the room, moving as if he had to push his way through muddy waves or rank grass.

In this manner he came upon the reflection of himself in the mantelpiece mirror, and turned upon it with a sort of snarl, like a dog who does not know its own image.

If the snarl had been interpreted it would have been by some such words as—

“So *you* are the man who has cheated the grey head, which may be struck with the deafness of death before you can unsay your words.”

In a moment or two he looked at himself more mercifully, then coloured, and soon smiled, raising his eyebrows, and saying,

“What do you think of yourself, old boy, as a love-sick swain?”

He went back quietly to his chair at the breakfast-table, and his rage was quite spent. Despair itself had come to comfort him by telling him that he had perhaps told but the simple truth in saying he had lost her who would have been his wife.

Michael knew not at all whom this might be, yet he believed he would have married some one sooner or later but for the event which caused him to leave his home. And now what woman on earth would have him when his hands and brain and heart were sworn slaves to that purpose which might take his life to accomplish?

Mrs. Ambray, when she heard him, as she went out of the room, declare that this was a world of liars, concluded that the poor fellow had not lost his betrothed by death, but had been jilted very cruelly.

She told the story, with the addition of many romantic surmises of her own, to Ambray when she had soothed his cough, and it led to the old couple falling, hand-in-hand, into ecstasies of admiration, and tender, proud delight over Nora's faithfulness to George.

CHAPTER X.

MA'R S'ONE.

“ Among this poure folk there dwelt a man
Which that was holden pourest of them all ;
But highe God sometime senden can
His grace unto a little ox's stall.”

CHAUCER.

MICHAEL looked a little shamefaced when Mrs. Ambray came back ; but her eyes saw only his sadness, and from it took to themselves a fresh shade of pathetic wonder at the world and its ways.

Michael saw this, and was touched, and remained shamefaced still.

They had nearly finished breakfast when the garden gate creaked with a more prolonged noise than usual, as creaking gates

will do when hesitating hands are opening them.

A step came up the garden, and a knock at the door, which Michael, with the habits of a family drudge strong upon him, jumped up to open.

The early visitor was Ma'r S'one.

He was looking tired; for early as it was, much of the "burthen and heat of the day" had already been his. He was looking scared, too, and beseeching, like a child who had been forced to go up to a teacher with a lesson that was not half learnt.

He had made himself particularly tidy for his visit, and had in his clean smock—so freshly put on as to show the marks of its folds—the same kind of innocent self-consciousness as a child in a clean pinafore.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Ma'r S'one," said Michael; "and how might *you* find yourself to-day?"

"Nicely, nicely, thank you, sir," answered

Ma'r S'one; but at the same time he stared up at Michael with a humble, self-deprecating gaze, as if he were quite conscious that, however "nicely" he might be, his state was vastly different from that of his kind inquirer.

Backward a scholar in the world's school as Ma'r S'one was, he had yet learnt one lesson of his own setting very perfectly, and that one was, that being so small a creature, with such small capacities, he must rest satisfied with very small things indeed; small wages, small health, small sympathy, small notice of any kind from God or man.

When others incomparably better off than himself chafed at their lot, Ma'r S'one could offer a ready sympathy, and he often thought that he must be really the only man in the world who got his deserts. So he always ate his food and lay down in his bed deeply grateful, but timorous of coming trouble.

He was very timorous that morning, as he stood at the miller's door, leaning on his pitchfork, and Michael had not looked at him a moment before he began to suspect him of bringing bad news.

"Be the master 'bout yet?" he asked, when he had replied to Michael's inquiry after his health.

"No," said Mrs. Ambray, who by this time had come to the door, and at whom Ma'r S'one looked very much frightened indeed, and pulled his silver forelock; "he is not up, yet—what is it you want, Ma'r S'one?"

Ma'r S'one looked up at her and the patch on the breast of his smock heaved tremulously—his small eyes dilated and his small mouth puckered like the mouth of a child going to cry.

Mrs. Ambray, like Michael, grew suspicious, and her face hardened at Ma'r S'one's behaviour.

"What do you want?" she said again, sharply.

Ma'r S'one shook his head helplessly, as if to express his inability to speak while she made him so frightened; so she waited, fixing her eyes on him with a stony patience.

At last his withered throat began to move, and the small thin voice came.

"Missis is done it. She's let 'em, she has. T' High Mills is let away."

Mrs. Ambray looked at him steadily for a moment or two, then turned and went away, and Michael and Ma'r S'one, following her with their eyes, saw her go straight to the door of the room where her husband was lying.

In an instant Michael was beside her, his arm between her and the door, and closing round her with a son-like support.

"What are you going to do?" he said.

She looked at him, and the look was sufficient answer. He saw that the despair of Job's wife was upon her—that she had been hurrying away to lay her head down

by her husband's side, and say—"All is gone, John ; let us die ! "

Michael's grasp grew firmer round her.

"Come," said he, "if you were my mother I should be ashamed of you. Sit down, and let us talk to Mr. Ma'r S'one a bit. Things may not be so bad as they seem."

He placed her in a chair, and stood behind her, with one hand laid firmly but almost reverentially on her shoulder.

He wished to make her feel that help was near, yet dared not tell her so, or let her guess how deeply Ma'r S'one's news concerned him as well as herself.

As they both looked at Ma'r S'one with eyes that plainly demanded a fuller version of his story, he stepped timidly over the threshold, and began at once his explanations, scarcely stopping for breath.

"She never comed 'ome laarst night, she dedn't, she nor Ann Ditch—but sent a letter by the red kaart to the pos' arffice

for Ma'r Simon, and he readed it out to me when I wur fed'n the caarves, and there it wur all about it as she'd let the mills and all this field to Mr. Phillops as had his mill burnt down at Tidhurst. And she dedn't wish fur to shock John Ambray, and thart we'd break it to un fore she comed 'ome."

"When *is* she coming home?" asked Michael.

"This marnin', sir, 'bout 'leven, so it says in the letter, as Ma'r Simon readed it to me."

Ma'r S'one spoke solemnly as if he were giving evidence about a case of murder before a judge and jury, and indeed the affair was little less awful to him, for he thought that taking the High Mills from Ambray was like the parting of body and soul.

He was much excited, the bit of colour that was usually firm and ruddy on his cheeks had faded and left them very pale, and his eyes looked shocked and aghast.

He stood gazing with Michael at the face of Mrs. Ambray, which despair was making white and rigid.

“The Lord furgive Mars Garge!” he cried suddenly and with unwonted vehemence.

Mrs. Ambray looked at him, and light came in her eyes, and her lips moved.

“That he never, never will, Ma’r S’one,” said she.

Michael’s hand grew suddenly heavy as lead upon her shoulder, and he shook her a little as he cried in heavy laboured tones close to her ear—

“Do *you* say that? His mother! Shame! Shame!”

She was much too deep in her sorrow to hear what passed over her, what comfort, what reproach, all could but pass over, not touch, her.

Ma’r S’one seeing that they looked at him for no more tidings, and feeling also that he had no more to give, sighed gently,

and went his way, closing the door softly after him.

In Ma'r S'one's small part on life's stage most of the exits *were* quite ineffective and noiseless. However difficult and laborious, or painful, or pathetic the scene he had been playing, no excitement followed him: no sound of applause disturbed his silence as the end of his little old smock fluttered away.

CHAPTER XI.

MICHAEL'S DIPLOMACY.

“ Ah ! had I never seen
Or known your kindness, what might I have been ? ”

KEATS.

MICHAEL was not used to giving advice. His old father and mother, while expecting from him the work of a man, demanded, at the same time, the awe and humility of a child, and would have regarded with deep displeasure any attempt of his at guiding their fast-failing minds.

Unknown to them, however, Michael did direct them very often ; but this was only managed by innocent stratagems, at which he was somewhat of an adept.

If his father happened to be in a little perplexity, and Michael saw a way out of it, he would give his view of the case by pretending to quote some village "wiseacre" in whom he knew his father had much faith; or even sometimes profess to remember what he was suggesting as having been proposed by his father himself to some neighbour in like difficulty. The old man, if he saw the idea was good, would exclaim, "Did I say that, really? Well, I had almost forgotten it; but, upon my word, I think I was very right. What say you, mother?" Then Michael's mother would answer proudly, "What do *I* say? Why, that there's none but you could have thought of it, Joseph."

And Michael would go back to his work, smiling to himself and whistling softly.

It was, then, no wonder, that though he had for some minutes felt assured of what would be the best course for the Ambrays to pursue, Michael found himself

in much perplexity about how to make known his thoughts to the grey-haired woman, whose mute suffering was inspiring him with filial respect and awe.

She sat, with her hands folded in her lap, her eyes gazing straight out before her, her lips closed tightly.

Michael had left her chair, and was standing at the window, feeling her dumb grief go through him as acutely as if she were lifting up her voice in the most loud and passionate lamentation.

It was while her eyes were turning vacantly from their fixed gaze that they fell on him and took in the consciousness of his sympathy.

"Tell me," she said suddenly, "what shall I do? How shall I break this to my poor man?"

"I think, when you come to consider it, you will think that the best thing would be not to tell him yet at all."

"But he is going to beg her mercy.

He thinks of getting up in an hour or two and going to beg of her to give him another trial, on account of you."

"I think you'll see, when you think over it, that that would just be the best thing he could do still," answered Michael.

Mrs. Ambray shook her head.

"He'd never forgive me if he knew I had let him have the shame of asking for what's gone."

"But is it quite gone?"

"You don't know Jane Moon, my good man, or you'd never doubt it."

She sat silent a minute, her soft brows knit in thought that only turned to pain as it came, and in a little while her tears began to flow down the face she averted from Michael as proudly as she could.

"Do we agree that it is to be so, then?" asked Michael, gently; "that the master is to go and say his say about the mill, and me, and changed prospects?"

"Yes, God forbid I should be above

taking advice at such a time when trouble makes me helpless as a babe," said Mrs. Ambray.

She rose, and began to move slowly and tremblingly about the room over her household duties.

"I dare say you think I might show myself more grateful," she said, stopping by Michael; "but you don't know, and may you never know, the soreness that comes with gratitude to strangers to such as are like me, neglected and deserted in their need by them who are nearest and dearest to 'em. I often think God only knows what the poor man that the Samaritan was good to felt in his heart because he *was* a Samaritan, and not the one his soul and his flesh cried out to."

She trembled so that she was obliged to set down the loaf she had taken up to put away, and, burying her face in her hands, she turned from Michael, and gave way to a fresh burst of grief.

“Oh! that heartless boy—why was he born? Then there’s Nora, she comes here and kisses me, and calls me ‘mother,’ yet there she stays fooling her time away at Stone Crouch while we’re being turned out neck and crop.”

“Then do you think Miss Ambray knows about her aunt letting the mills?” asked Michael.

“I can’t tell,” Mrs. Ambray answered, with sudden sternness and perplexity. “I can’t tell.”

For the next minute she was silent and lost in thought. Her face was looking both proud and wistful.

Michael knew she was thinking of her niece—was longing for the girl’s sympathy and intercession, but loathing the idea of the lady’s patronage and charity.

“I may as well tell you,” she said to Michael at last. “I have been thinking of Nora Ambray ever since Ma’r S’one was here. Yes, you are right, she would

come and fight our battle for us if she knew, I'm sure enough of that; but what I'm *not* sure of is, that we've any right to accept of her help."

"How so?" asked Michael with gentle remonstrance.

Mrs. Ambray walked to the door of her husband's room, and without bending her head seemed to listen there for a little while. Satisfied apparently that he still slept, she came back slowly to where Michael stood and laid her hand upon his arm.

"I didn't think to speak of this which I *must* speak of, to one I never saw till yesterday; but trouble makes strangers soon acquainted sometimes, and it seems as if the Lord had sent you that we might not be *quite* alone in our misfortune to-day. Well, Michael Swift, the truth is, I dare not look to Miss Ambray to help us, because I feel guilty before her. She calls me mother, and my heart misgives me,

so I dare not look at her when she kneels beside me and lays her proud head in my lap, and will have me talk of George. I know she often wonders why I let it cost her so much humbling of herself, and so many blushes before I do so; but oh, if she knew how the least word that I say of him to her seems to blister my tongue and heat my face—if she knew how I long to go down on my poor old knees before her and say to her, ‘Sweet soul, forgive us! my boy cares no more for you than for the father and mother he has set at nought.’ Oh, how the girl would rise and look at me!”

Michael's averted eyes became more and more dreary and heavy-looking as Mrs. Ambray made him feel the strength and trustfulness and humility of Nora's love for her son, though it was evident that the suspicion of George Ambray's faithlessness did not surprise him in the least.

“I can—I think I can understand your

feelings in this matter," he said, when he had made Mrs. Ambray sit down, and both had been silent a little while; "but excuse me, if I say that I still think you wrong to doubt about letting the young lady know of her aunt's day's work yesterday."

Mrs. Ambray looked up at him searchingly. Michael smiled.

"You think I'm speaking one word for the master and two for the man, I see," he said. "No, begging your pardon, you are wrong there. I could take my lines and get work anywhere. I speak only for your good."

"I don't doubt you," answered Mrs. Ambray, wiping her eyes proudly. "You are not the only one who has been taken with the master at first sight. But as to sending to Nora——"

"It must be done for the master's sake," asserted Michael, with gentle decision, "it must be done."

Mrs. Ambray shook her head.

"It's impossible," she declared. "Who can tell her?"

"Why, I can, if nobody else can," answered Michael promptly.

"Bless the man! don't you know Stone Crouch is six miles from here," she said, "and Jane Moon will be home at eleven, and it's near ten now, and the master'll be up directly he wakes, and wanting you to go to the farm with him. What's the good of talking in that way?"

"The master has a horse for the little waggon in the shed there?" asked Michael.

"Yes, he has," replied Mrs. Ambray gloomily. "Poor old Fleetfoot, who takes an hour to get down the hill to the smithy."

"Isn't there some neighbour who would lend a beast for the master's sake in such a strait as this?"

"No," answered Mrs. Ambray shortly;

“those that would can’t, and those that could won’t.”

“Surely now,” said Michael, looking blank; “well, the country’s very much like London in some respects. What are we to do?”

“There’s only one thing I can think of, and that’s ridiculous,” said Mrs. Ambray at last.

Michael brightened.

“You heard Ma’r S’one speak of Simon? Well, he is Mrs. Moon’s nephew, and is supposed to have the management of things when the mistress is away, though Ma’r S’one really has to do everything and mind Simon into the bargain, who is as frightened of Jane Moon as Ma’r S’one himself is.”

“Then how can we expect him to help us?”

“Because he’s still more frightened of Nora Ambray; and to please her might p’r’aps be scared into going to her himself or lending us a horse.”

"But who's to work up Mr. Simon's feelings to the necessary state? Were *you* thinking of going to him? Could you go?"

"*Me* go? *I* go prowling about Jane Moon's premises when she's away! No, Michael Swift, not quite that, even to save the mill."

"Then shall I take Mr. Simon a message from you," asked Michael, "and manage him as best I can?"

"No, no," answered Mrs. Ambray; "a message from me would do harm instead of good. This Simon hates us because of George. He would only be too glad to see us driven from the mill. It's only the fear of Nora's anger that would make him do what you want."

"Then I must go and find him, and do my best, and take my chance," said Michael, looking round for his cap. "There's no time to lose. Good-bye for the present. When you see me again I

hope it will be on one of Mrs. Moon's best horses."

It was scarcely half-an-hour after Michael left the miller's house that he was seen riding on a lazy but strong little cob, which was much stared at by two ladies squeezed closely together in an uncomfortably small and high chaise which Michael met crawling along at a very dignified pace indeed.

He thought that one of the ladies stretched out her neck to look after him as he passed; of this, however, he could not be sure, but he was in no doubt at all as to a shrill and rather a nasal voice exclaiming in tones that the fresh breeze brought very clearly to his ear—

"Ann Ditch! I could ha' swore that there was my harse!"

CHAPTER XII.

AT STONE CROUCH.

“ Long before
I looked upon her, when I heard her name
My heart was like a prophet to my heart,
And told me I should love.”

TENNYSON.

Not since the days when Nora Ambray used to smuggle him from the farm stables for George's use, had the cob known such a rider as he bore that morning.

At first he showed much surprise and temper, and endeavoured by swerving from side to side, making dead halts, and kicking, to prove to Michael his utter inability to go at such a pace as that to which he urged him.

In a little while, however, he appeared to be growing interested and excited over his own powers so drawn out and put to the proof by Michael; and before long he entered fully into the spirit of Michael's resolute and headlong haste, and overtook and distanced everything on the road before him with all the vigour and impetuosity of his best days. These, certainly, were not *quite* so far back as long idleness and overfeeding had made them seem to him.

"There, old fellow," said Michael, as he gave him a hasty breakfast at the village below the hill that led up to Stone Crouch. "*You've* not enjoyed a bit as you do this for many a long day, I know. You're like a good many of your betters, you are: you've laid lazying and licking the sugar off life till you've forgot the taste of a good, deep, hearty bite."

Stone Crouch was reached before Michael had satisfied himself in the least as to

what he should say to Miss Ambray when he saw her, or what message he should send in to her if she refused to see him.

The house was long, low, and of a greenish white stone, lower in the middle than at the two ends which formed two square towers newer than the other part and whiter. Before it spread meadow after meadow, swept clean and clear by the March winds right down to the sea. Behind it a line of poplars swayed.

This much Michael could afterwards remember of the outside of Stone Crouch, and no more. He could never recall the face of the servant to whom he spoke the words he said, or the door by which he entered; for the moment he found himself actually asking for the person whom he had come to seek, his head turned as dizzy as when he first heard the noise of the grindstone and the sails in the lane to the High Mills.

The next thing which he remembered,

and which he never forgot, was the sound of music and singing that kept breaking off and being followed by peals of laughter and by the chattering of many voices ; from which Michael understood that a number of young people were practising a song, but growing tired of it, and lightening the lesson by snatches of other songs, by witticisms on each other's mistakes, remonstrances for order and attention, and reckless wanderings into soft dance tunes.

From the voices that called to order, and the voices that laughed, Michael's ear instantly singled out one, and hearkened for it, and to it—only.

He had never heard Nora's voice before, but he was certain that this one was hers. It did as the other's did—sang, scolded, and laughed, and *how* it said to him, "*I am the stray bird you have come to seek,*" he knew not, but it did say as much to him very plainly.

It seemed to belong to her name, to her story—to the hope deferred that “maketh the heart sick,” and which was hers; to her strong faith in the absent; to her love and her watching; to the little mill; to the names cut there; to the parting that happened there; to the lips that kissed the names upon the bin but yesterday, when the mill-sails on all the heights were resting, and the tenderness of night and silence crept along the downs.

“Suppose Miss Ambray sings it alone once more,” Michael heard above the merry confusion, and he thought, “Now I shall hear if this really is the voice.”

Entreaties followed, the song was sung, and Michael found that he was right.

He could not at first catch many of the words, but the spirit of the song, the voice, and the accent, made him feel unable to stand.

Never had the effects of what had befallen him appeared more fearful than at that moment.

He held the heavy dining-room chair, and prayed that God might mercifully keep him unseen by any eye but His for a little while.

And Nora went on singing—

“What will you do, love,
If, home returning
With hopes high burning,
The ship goes down?”

Then, as in the last lines her voice rose in triumphant faith and constancy, drops of sweat stood on Michael's forehead, his lips parted, and whitened, and he stared before him like one gazing at a mother hushing a dead child in her arms without knowing it is dead, or at warm blood flowing for a cause that is lost.

Michael afterwards heard from Nora that it was old Miss Milwood, the general's sister, who had taken him into the dining-room, and who had been standing by Nora till her song was finished to tell her that a messenger from Lamberhurst was waiting to see her.

It was the same old lady who now came to the door with Nora, and went away again, shutting in the music and voices.

Michael took his hand from the chair, and used his whole strength to keep it steady as he held his cap crushed against his side.

At first he felt surprised and chilled at the brightness of Nora's dress, then surprise at himself for being surprised, and fear at the thought of what folly he might be guilty of next.

She came towards him, and he looked at her and took in her image at once and for ever.

He knew her nearly as well at that moment as he did in aftertimes when he saw her every day. He understood at once that this Nora Ambray was a woman whose heart was a tyrant to her beauty—which, fresh as it was, was tried and fretted as May leaves are when cold winds return. Lovely as the blue eyes were, and possessed

of little points of light ready to spread and brighten into visible laughter at any moment, Michael saw in them the worn, strained look, telling unmistakably of wakefulness and tears, and overhasty, heart-hurting conclusions concerning the world they looked out upon with so strange a mixture of longing and defiance.

She stood before Michael with all her faults and virtues, all her soul in her face, yet with a certain haughty turn of the chin, and lowering of the tender petulant eyelids, which seemed to denote the most perfect confidence in her own powers of self-concealment, and a calm defiance of the world's scrutiny.

All this Michael saw in Nora when he first looked in her face as she stood waiting for him to speak, her eyes softening with thoughts of home—her lacework frame held laxly by one hand—a great brown tress rising and falling on her heart—restless and eager for his news.

Seeing him so silent and so pale, Nora began to suspect all was not well, and questioned him at first gently.

“You have come from my Uncle Ambray’s?”

So George’s affianced wife had spoken to him, and must be answered.

His voice seemed gone. He bowed his head.

The brown tress began to stir more quickly—the fingers to tighten on the lace-frame.

“Something is the matter,” said Nora. “What is it? Have they had news—bad news?”

He moved his shoulders, he moistened his lips, and tried to look back to his mission, to that morning’s history, which Nora’s presence had driven far from him, and in his endeavour to think of it only, he answered clumsily—

“Yes, that is it. Yes, they have had bad news.”

“From London?”

He looked at the little lace-frame thrown down, at the hands clasped over the tremulous curl and heart, and saw what he had done, and let his horror show itself in his eyes, looking into hers as they questioned him.

At that moment he seemed scarcely able to keep his reason.

“London!” he repeated. “No. Who said from London? *I* did not—I am *sure* I did not.”

“But you mean it,” cried Nora. “Tell at once what it is. Perhaps you have been told not to tell me. But that is nonsense. I must hear. You must tell me at once.”

She looked at him, and took fresh and fresh alarms from his pallor and the suffering in his eyes.

Unable to support herself, she sat down by the table, on which she clasped her hands tightly, and, averting her face from

Michael, bent her head like one trying to turn a great agony to prayer.

Then she looked up, and asked, with an unnatural calmness in her voice and face—

“What is it? I wish to hear the truth. What have you come to say? You have bad news about George Ambray. Tell it quickly.”

She wished to hear the truth; Michael understood that much; in one word he might tell it, and for an instant a passion for truth seized him, and almost made him speak the word that would cover an honest name with infamy, and a sunny hopeful life with despair and misery.

“No,” he cried, with sudden strength; “you mistake. I am a stranger. I—I was sent about the mills to you—nothing else.”

“Are you speaking truly?”

“My message was, that Mrs. Moon, of Buckholt Farm, let the High Mills yester-

day; that Mr. Ambray is going this morning to the farm about it, and your aunt thought you would wish to interfere. This was my message, and I had no other. They have not heard from London—that I know too; and that—is all—I had to tell Miss Ambray.”

Nora rose indignant about the letting of the mills, but with her indignation Michael saw there had come a rush of sweet comfort and fresh hope; and he hung his head and his face darkened.

“Tell them I am—no—only tell them I shall be there as soon as possible. You will make haste back?”

“I will.”

“You should stay and have something, for you look tired; but I think you had better not, as this is very important.”

She was putting her hand into her pocket as she spoke and drawing out a little purse.

Opening it, she involuntarily glanced up

to see what her messenger might be worth, and, meeting the great honest eyes full of gentle dignity looking at her, she felt half inclined to put it back, but pride caused her to refuse to give way to this impulse, and she held something out to him with an imperious air, as if daring him to refuse it.

“You are very good,” said Michael, with great gentleness; “but my time is the master’s—in the mill or out of it.”

He had spoken too humbly for her to be angry—she only looked confused, as she snapped her purse to and put it in her pocket; but the next instant she looked at him with bright commendation, and said simply—

“Then I thank you for coming; and you *will* make haste back?”

“I will,” answered Michael.

Another minute, and he was once more on the road, looking back at the great

wind-swept meadows, clean and ready for their summer wealth, from the house to the sea, and at the poplars, swaying their heads against the sky.

CHAPTER XIII.

BUCKHOLT FARM.

“ On well-worn hinges turns the gate no more,
Nor social friendship hastes the friend to meet,
Nor, when the accustomed guest draws near the door,
Run the glad dogs and gambol round his feet.”

SOUTHEY.

MRS. AMBRAY'S face, when she opened the garden-gate to Michael, told him at once that the miller was up, waiting to go to the farm, and angry at his absence.

“ What have you done with the cob ? ” she whispered.

“ I didn't know what to do with him,” replied Michael, “ so I've given the blacksmith a shilling to take care of him till I'd asked you.”

“ You must leave him there, then, for

the present. You mustn't keep the master waiting another instant; and, mind, I've let him think I saw you asleep through the mill window and couldn't make you hear; he's not surprised, for we've seen that you've not been in your bed at all."

As Michael entered, Ambray was standing up, with his tall Sunday hat in his hand. He chose to wear that, instead of his white cap, not from respect to the lady he was about to visit, but because he wished to assume as much dignity as possible on his much-hated errand.

"Pray, is this one of your London habits," he said to Michael, "sleeping in the day, instead of the night?"

"But I slept in the night too, master," answered Michael, rubbing his eyes. "I've had more walking than I've been used to this last day or so—I suppose that's it."

"And what was the matter with your room that you couldn't sleep there, like a Christian?"

“Why, to tell the truth, I hardly felt like a Christian in it,” Michael said, turning to Mrs. Ambray with a look of complimentary apology. “When the mistress shut me in, and I looked at the pink walls and the pink and white bed, all rosetted and beveled, I felt like a dog in a bandbox with somebody’s best bonnet.”

The miller smiled grimly.

“You must let him have the attic,” he said to his wife, “if—ay, *if*—he stays. Come,” he added, turning to Michael, “are you ready *now*?”

Mrs. Ambray went with them as far as the mills, and watched them down the White Lane, feeling a great liking for Michael, as she saw how carefully he guided the miller’s weak steps without seeming to guide them at all.

The day was fortunately very warm, and Ambray felt that the air, after his long sleep, was reviving and giving him courage.

“It was just such a day as this when my son went away,” he said, turning and looking up towards the mill-field. “I remember the wind was west’ly because he turned the mill round for me—last thing. He didn’t like me to have to do even that much—*then*.”

Michael said nothing, but he never afterwards turned the mill to catch the west wind without remembering that it was so George Ambray’s eyes had last seen it.

The house of Buckholt Farm was about a quarter of a mile from the High Mills, and stood with its side to the road. It had been an old manor house, with all sorts of quaint irregularities of architecture and green overgrowths, but Mrs. Moon after the death of her first husband, had behaved very hardly to it, seizing upon it as on some happy neglected child, and shearing off its ivy locks, white-washing the fruit-stains from its face, tearing away

its flower-garlands, and rendering it miserably tidy.

The white blinds were drawn up to precisely the same height at all the windows, from basement to garret. The door, which in the time of the miller's father had been used to stand open, showing the gleam of the oak passage and silver-mounted stag-horns, was closed, and had an obstinate inhospitable look.

Some snowdrops shivered in the wintry garden, looking lost and strange, like pale spirits who had mistaken the day of resurrection, and come forth before the world was ready.

There was nothing stirring in the yard outside the garden but a bundle of hay moving horizontally along, with two trembling drab things under it which Michael recognized as Ma'r S'one's legs.

In the field beyond piles of hop-sticks were "weathering," ready to be "tanked" or tarred; and the hop-gardens, where

the present mistress of Buckholt Farm had once picked the hops barefooted, lay sloping southwards past the little Norman church of another parish.

Against the house at the left of the door a large bundle of birch was fastened by a leather band nailed across it. It looked so like a symbol of Mrs. Moon's domestic discipline to Michael, that he was relieved by seeing the miller rub his shoes against it, and so make known to him its right use. He afterwards found this primitive scraper and door-mat at most of the inland farms and mills of Southdownshire.

When Ambray lifted his hand to the knocker, he turned his head and looked up at the High Mills, as if the sight of them should give him the courage that he was evidently lacking; for Michael saw his face had grown paler since they had left the road, and heard, too, that his breathing was becoming short and hard.

The front windows were partially open,

and through them, as soon as the miller had knocked, came the sound of the same voice Michael had heard when passing the ladies in the chaise on his way to Stone Crouch.

“Ann Ditch,” cried the voice, “*whoever’s* that knocking at the fore door? It’s not Nara’s knock, I know. Go round and see.”

In a minute steps came round from the back, and looking in their direction, Michael saw a stout young woman with a hard mouth and a squint, who no sooner caught sight of the miller than she ran back again the same way she had come.

She evidently told her mistress who her visitor was; for the same voice was heard exclaiming—

“And why on ’arth didn’t you tell John Ambray to go round to the back door? You know I never has the fore door open ’cept when Nara’s at home!”

Ambray raised his hand and knocked a little more loudly than before.

Michael would have urged upon him the advisability of at least making a pacific entrance; but something in the miller's face forbid him to interfere.

Ann Ditch appeared again and gave her message,—

“Will you come round to the back door, please?”

The miller did not even turn his head and look at her; and his only reply to her request was another almost frenzied knock.

Ann Ditch, in running back, met Ma'r S'one, relieved of his burden, and consulted with him.

He advanced trembling.

“Do'ee come to the back just fur peace an' quiet, Ma'rs John,” he entreated.

Ambray turned and looked at him, and Michael saw something deeper than anger in his eyes as they rested on the old man's face.

“What! Ma'r S'one,” said he in a

husky but not ungentle voice. "And do *you* think that's the right way for your good old master's sons to come into this house?"

Ma'r S'one accepted the bitterness of the reproof with all his little heart and mind.

"No, Ma'rs John," he cried in great distress. "No, no; I don't, I don't; but, —'marcy upon us and 'cline our 'erts t' keep this la'!"

Which law Ma'r S'one alluded to was not known; but this was his invariable adjuration when he saw human passions getting beyond control, or sorrow unendurable: and there had been times when his helpless cry had fallen on tempted hearts with more meaning than Ma'r S'one was aware of.

To his great relief, his mistress proved less obstinate than her visitor; for, after Ann Ditch had gone back a second time, she sent her to open the front door, and

Ambray, leaning heavily on Michael's arm, went in.

"Missis is in the parlour," said Ann, leading the way; and into the parlour they followed her.

This room was one kept entirely for use, and showed no attempt whatever at ornament, unless it might be in the manner the sausages were festooned from a rope close to the ceiling, almost crowning, like victorious wreaths, the Sunday hats of Simon and Ma'r S'one, which also hung suspended by their brims from the same rope.

Mrs. Moon sat at the table, casting up her accounts, and pretending for a minute to be too much engrossed to look up when they came in.

Michael looked at her face in vain for one remaining trace of the beauty which had been the cause of John Ambray's poverty. It had vanished as entirely as that year's hops which had garlanded and

cast the sweet glamour of dancing lights and shadows over it.

Fat, white, and pasty, with small, almost colourless eyes, low brows, insignificant nose and mouth, double chin, light red hair jauntily rolled up into a knob at the back of her head—no waving hop-garlands—no mingling of shadows and lights—no glamour could make that face seem lovely for one moment now. The rose had fallen, the perfume vanished, the thorn lived, strong and sharp.

“Twenty pence is one and eightpence,” said Mrs. Moon. “Good marnin’, John Ambray.”

“Good morning, Jane,” answered the miller, sternly and curtly.

“And four’s two shillin’s. Ann Ditch, I won’t put up t’ harse at that there Lion again—it costis me twice as much as it do at the Dorlphin. Well, John Ambray, I wonder you shud ’sist so on havin’ the fore door opened, speshly with

a passel o' men's feet with you, to tramp all over the place."

"I don't often trouble my father's house, Jane Moon," replied the miller, more sadly than angrily; "but when I *do* have occasion to come into it I shall never do so by any other door than the one he came in at when he came home wounded from Waterloo; and that he went out at in his coffin, with his head on my brother's shoulder and his feet on mine."

"Two and three's five, and seven's twelve," continued Mrs. Moon placidly. "I suppose you've come about the mills, John Ambray—of course you have. Well, it's a very okerd thing, there's no doubt o' that, *very* okerd; but same time you caant expect me to keep two great lumberin' mills like that standin' there dead in the wind, and cumberin' the farm for nothing. I on'y wonder as your own sense didn't show you that long ago, and lead you to

tarn your hand to something else, speshly as Garge is gone the road to ruin."

"Now, leave *George's* name alone, Jane," cried the miller quickly and agitatedly, "whatever you say to *me*."

"I'm willin' enough to do that, John Ambray, and I'm not going to pretend as it's not a great marcy for Nara's sake as he's kept away. It's natural as I shud be thenkful to see her prospec's arl right again, and I *am* thenkful. As to that Garge, I always said as you wouldn't lose much if you was never to see him again."

Ambray, quivering with anger, was turning upon her, when Michael stopped him by a monitory touch of his foot.

He paused, and his cough took away the strength of his passion.

"I told you before, Jane," he said at last faintly, and with a great effort at calmness, "I did not come to talk about my son, but about the mills. It's quite right

what you have been saying ; of course I know I could not expect you to let us go on in the way we have been doing, and I came to tell you I have made up my mind to take a man, and get things all straight again ; and I am sure I needn't say how Esther and me'll pinch and live on a mere nothing till we've paid off the long score you have against us."

"Now, what *are* you talking about, John Ambray?" cried Mrs. Moon, looking up with her pen in the middle of a column of figures ; "one 'ud think you was pretending you *didn't* know the mills was let, which is nonsense, as I wrote off about it last night, and Ma'r S'one went up this marnin', and everything behind-hand in consequence, a purpose to tell you."

"What does she say?" said Ambray, turning to Michael, and passing his hand over his face with a sort of laugh ; "she's

let the mills? Hah! I'd like to see her do it."

Ma'r S'one had just been putting wood on the fire, and was creeping out again, shaking his head; and Michael caught as he passed by him, murmured in a solemn patient sigh, the words,

"T' keep this la'."

"Ann Ditch!" called Mrs. Moon. "*Do* come here and tell me whether you meant this for a eight or a five. I *never* see such a girl for figgerin' in all my life!"

Before Ann could approach the table, the miller's fist had descended upon it, close by Mrs. Moon's ink-bottle and account-book.

"Look here, Jane," said he, leaning over it and bending down to make his face even with hers, "I've worked in the High Mills, and they've been looked on as mine since I was seventeen, and now I'm seventy-one. Now look me in the face, I say, if you dare, and tell me that

you—you—you—who came from starving in ditches to fatten on the plenty of this house, have let 'em away from me—have beggared me.”

“It’s a five,” said Mrs. Moon. Then closing her book, she added, “Really, John Ambray, how vi’lent you are—there’s the ink all over the table.”

Ambray slowly drew himself up and stood erect, while despair and anger strove with equal strength for possession of him.

Suddenly, as he stood staring before him, Michael saw his eyes soften, his head uplifted wistfully.

“Never mind, Ma’r S’one,” said the voice Michael had been listening for ever since he entered the house, “he will have a long rest, for I’m not going back to-day.”

“Why, Nara!” cried Mrs. Moon, “it’s never you?”

Then Michael’s eyes fell on her when she came in from the passage—the three

farm dogs licking her habit, and making frantic, but hesitating, leaps at her hand.

He saw again the sweet ghost of the mill, and all the early days of George's wooing cast a spell about him that made the present as a mere dream.

His heart throbbed quickly with the very thought of the joy that had been, and would be no more, in the affection of these two now so widely separated.

Looking upon what George had lost, the sweetest woman as she seemed to him that he ever had seen, his honest heart forgot to hide its pain.

For the second time that day, Nora was startled by the gaze she met. It was full of amazed and aggrieved admiration, and strange, unfathomable pity.

For the second time, too, it seemed to her that she was close to evil tidings of George.

With keen, rapid questioning in her eyes, she looked hastily from Michael to

the others ; and though their faces wore no very glad expressions, none seem to confirm the wild thought that Michael's had suggested.

CHAPTER XIV.

NORA'S INTERCESSION FAILS.

"I'm tender-hearted, but I dare be just.
I never go beyond the law, I trust."

BUCHANAN.

AMBRAY'S first impulse was to appeal to Nora in all the heat of his passionate trouble.

He took a step or two towards her, but the next instant he evidently remembered that it behoved him, as George's father, to have some pride before her even on such an occasion.

He grasped Michael's shoulder more firmly with his trembling hand, erected his head, and met Nora's earnest pained look with one of gentle welcome.

“Good morning, Nora,” he said, trying to keep his lips from trembling as they touched her forehead.

Michael longed for the miller to take his hand from his shoulder. It was a sharper struggle and trial than he had ever dreamed of to have to stand so near to Nora Ambray, so near that the edge of her riding habit took some of the white mill-dust from his feet.

He knew that the blood was deserting his face, and doubted whether his breath would obey him should he be called upon to speak even a single word.

By this time Mrs. Moon had approached them, and was standing with her hands on her hips, lost in admiration of the sweetness of colour Nora’s rapid ride had brought to her cheeks and eyes.

Nora kept the miller’s long trembling hand as she received her aunt’s kiss very coldly.

Michael could see in a glance how

thoroughly she understood the power she had over her, and at the same time saw that she was too proud and too heartily honest to like turning that power to use.

For nearly a minute no one spoke. Mrs. Moon watched with some evident misgiving, Ambray with hope, the frown on Nora's brow as she took off her hat and laid it on the table.

It fell to the floor, and Ma'r S'one, who had followed her in, picked it up. He stood gazing from it to his own and Simon's, as if its similarity of shape suggested to him the idea of hanging it on the beam beside them, a proceeding which his respect for Nora evidently made repugnant to him.

So he stood holding the hat in a state of helpless indecision till Mrs. Moon snatched it from him, and with a push sent his weary little feet tottering hastily back to the path of duty which he had in his timid gallantry permitted himself for one moment to abandon.

“Your Uncle Ambray’s here about the mills, Nora,” said Mrs. Moon, thinking she might perchance gain some little advantage by opening the battle herself. “But do take a glass o’ wine, now; you’re tired. There now,” she added, after bustling to the cupboard and pouring out some kept for Nora’s special use, “take it right arf, there’s a pet!”

“I don’t want it, Aunt Jane, thank you,” answered Nora with honest impetuous displeasure, that showed her a true Ambray even if her likeness to the old miller had not done so. “I know what Uncle Ambray has come to you about—I have heard—but it cannot, surely, be true?”

“It’s true, my girl,” burst out the miller, dragging himself and Michael in front of Nora. “She’s let the High Mills, Nora—she’s ruined us at the turning-point of our lives—she’s got her purpose in it too. She *knows*——”

His cough came on and shook him so

that Michael could scarcely support him. But his grief, having once begun to out-pour itself in the light of young eyes flashing with sympathetic anger, was not to be stopped.

"She *knows* if she takes the mills from us she takes the last straw that lad can cling to, if he fails in his art and comes back to us. That's what she means—she wants to starve us and disgrace us out of the place! But let her try. These old hands shall guide the plough or pick the dead bind off the poles before they shall earn bread on any other soil but this, that's been our own a century back and more."

"And so shall these hands too," said Nora with great quietness, though her voice seemed choking. "But I cannot understand it, Aunt. What *is* it all about?"

"Why, the truth is, Nara," answered Mrs. Moon, who seated herself in the arm-

chair by the fire, and spread her handkerchief over her lap as if preparing for a doze—"the truth is, that what I'm doing is for John Ambray's own good, and Esther's good, and Garge's too, in the long run, but your uncle *is* so vi'lent, there's no getting him to see it. I'm sure to hear him one ud think as I had any intentions of going agen justice and la' and everything, and arl because I caan't afford to make playthings o' the High Mills. Now, Nara dear, my proposals concernin' your Uncle Ambray's means of living was this—for I *had* proposals, only it was no use making them till he'd got over the first surprise at losing the mills. Well, these was my proposals, which I'm sure to *any* right-minded person must seem fair enough. As John Ambray caan't get no profit out o' the High Mills, he must give place to them as can, and then there's nothing to prevent him taking charge o' the stone

under the man as I let 'em to, and earnin' his guinea a week ; or let him lay up, as he ought to at his time o' life, and let Garge come and take the place. It's just what Garge wants, is a sharp hand like Phillops's over him."

"Oh, *that's* your proposal, is it? My son and I are to be servants in our own mill," said Ambray, turning to Nora, with his forehead drawn up, and a bitter smile upon his lips.

Michael could now see that Nora had become convinced of the whole truth of the matter, and that her cheeks were almost crimson with indignation.

"Uncle!" said she, laying her hand on the miller's arm with an air of mingled entreaty and command, "let me speak to Aunt Jane alone about this. I'm sure it will be best for you to go home and leave it to me a little while. Pray do."

This idea, however, evidently alarmed Mrs. Moon more than all the poor miller's

impotent rage had done. It was easy to see she doubted her own strength when alone with her favourite.

“No, Nara,” she exclaimed, rising from her chair and looking more disturbed than she had yet done. “That’ll be no use at arl. I’ve made up my mind about the High Mills, and nothing caan’t tarn me. When there’s la’ in the country I caan’t see why I’m to set at home and put up with things just as if there was no la’ at arl. You’re a young girl, Nara, as caan’t be supposed to know the value o’ la’. You know nothing o’ business, and needn’t, or if you did you’d know that in business la’ *must* be respected. For your sake, and the sake o’ my poor dear Maark’s family, I’ve put up with arl the worrit and waste of the High Mills, till the time’s come as I caan’t and won’t put up with it any longer.”

Mrs. Moon’s voice had, during this speech, been gradually attaining its well-known battle

pitch. She had begun her battle march, too, up and down the long parlour, her sweeping skirts flowing wide, and creaking boards crying out under the weight and energy of her tread.

Ma'r S'one turned back as he was entering the room with more logs for the fire, which was an excuse for hearing what was going on, as he had already supplied it too liberally.

This time, however, he turned back and declared to Ann Ditch and an old servant listening some way down the passage,

“Missis is up arful!”

The sound of her voice had already made all loiterers start and turn to their work, for when Mrs. Moon was what Ma'r S'one called “up,” no one on the farm remained long in ignorance of the fact. At such times she was like some warrior chief who made one collection of his forces do for settling not only the enemy for which the summons to war had been given, but

for calling to justice and punishment all the offenders on the territory at one and the same time.

“Jane!” cried the old miller in a tone of despairing entreaty, “look me in the face and say I am to go, and tell my poor Esther we’re to turn out of the High Mills, or to be servants there. *Am* I to do it?”

“You have heard my proposals, John Ambray,” answered Mrs. Moon, sweeping by him. “Nara, there’s the drarin’-room ready for you—this is a busy day, as you’re aware, and this is scarcely a fit room for you, when John Ambray’s here cumberin’ the place with a tribe o’ great hulking men.”

Michael, though he never felt less inclined to smile, had to bite his lip and lower his eyes at this second allusion to himself as a large number.

“Uncle,” said Nora, “go home, but don’t tell poor Aunt Esther yet. If I cannot come to you before evening with

better news, I will leave this house for ever."

Mrs. Moon's eyes winced a little as she heard the threat, but she was now too thoroughly roused to one of her general administrating fits of justice and law to be stayed by it, though it came from Nora's lips. The suppressed wrath in her heart at many little wrongs and annoyances in connection with business swelled to overflowing at this trouble and opposition about the High Mills.

Like a soldier preparing for a general slaughter, she marched up and down the room with a remorseless step and eye.

"You have heard my proposals, John Ambray," she repeated. "I leave you to consider them, and to let Phillops know whether you do or do not choose to stay on as grinder. Ma'r S'one!" Then as a trembling "Yes, missis," was heard at the door, "There was that dog o' Ather-ton's chasin' my chicken agen this

mornin'. I've waarned 'em four times—I'll waarn 'em no more. Mind old Moore's to shoot it next time it's found i' my premises."

"'Cline our——"

"And, Ma'r S'one! that boy Jack's a keppin' rabbits up in my 'ayloft. See as he takes home the pair as he braght, and let the others be tarned in wi' mine to 'pay expenses.' And, M'ar S'one! clean yourself as quick as you can. Now look sharp, there's some bills to take round and wait answers; and you can jest call in at Slater's and say as I shall take preceedin's next week. And, Ma'r S'one! I shall want t' harse and shay ready at three this aarfternoon to goo to my s'liciter's 'bout that there fence as Leigh's harse knocked down. And, Ma'r S'one! when you're over at Tidhurst call in at Smithers's 'bout the oats with my compliments, and I caan't give no more credit after Toosday. Jane! this kitten's

arloways under my feet. Tell Orry I'll have it drowned to-night."

Somewhat relieved apparently by the deliverance of these commands, Mrs. Moon again sank into her armchair at the fire.

The miller, who had been watching her and listening with a sort of fierce self-absorption, suddenly dragged his arm from Michael, and with a passionate gesture of his trembling hands strode towards the door.

"Aunt Jane!" cried Nora, going hastily to her, and laying her hand on her shoulder, while she spoke in a voice scarcely above a whisper, yet so distinctly that Michael, who for the moment had forgotten to follow his master, heard it clearly, "and do you really mean to let him go like that?"

Something in her tone and touch made Mrs. Best look up into the girl's face with searching and startled eyes.

"Nara!" she cried, rubbing her handkerchief between her moist and nervous

hands, "it's your own fault—it's arl your fault. Give up that worthless blaggerd of a Garge, and while John Ambray lives the High Mills shan't be took from him. I've told you so before—I say it again for the *laarst* time, Nara."

"For the last time—I hope—indeed," said Nora, gently taking her hand from her shoulder, but speaking with an earnestness that made Mrs. Moon tremble. "And now, Aunt—*good-bye*."

Michael, during the minute or two which had passed since the old miller broke from him, had completely forgotten his own existence in eager wonder as to what Nora would do.

Nora's firm "good-bye," so full of meaning, which he understood as well as her aunt, made him start and take some steps towards them, his eyes full of sad entreaty, and his lips parted.

At the sound of his hurried step both turned and looked at him in surprise.

Michael stood still. The colour rose to his dark face, and he muttered with drooping eyes,

"I beg your pardon."

"What is it you were going to say?" asked Nora.

"Why, this is the man your uncle was going to hire for a grinder," explained Mrs. Moon, looking at him sharply. "Never heard o' such a thing! Promising to employ a tribe o' tramps when he's no more right by la' to they mills than I have to Buck'nam Palace! Just take yourself arf, my man, and next time you hire yourself mind your master's got something for you to do."

Michael felt almost grateful to her for thus suggesting to Nora that he was probably going to remonstrate as to his own position in the event of the mills changing masters.

"Two days lost over it," he muttered, to strengthen this idea in their minds;

and then he was obliged to leave the house in great grief as to how the two would part. He felt that, most likely, their parting would be such as would ruin the only hope he had of being spared a life of misery, from which all his natural cheerfulness of heart could not save him.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. MOON HEARS WELCOME NEWS.

“O what to her shall be the end?”

TENNYSON.

MICHAEL did not have to remain long in suspense, for he had scarcely crossed the yard when he heard Nora's quick step on the garden path.

Michael stood still. They had parted, then, in this great bitterness, he thought, and the High Mills would be taken from George's old father, and Nora would lose her fortune all through her devotion to—what? He turned round and looked at the door from which he had just come, and a generous and vivid light filled his eyes.

The next moment, Mrs. Moon, who was sitting with her face buried in her handkerchief, heard the door pushed open and a step coming towards her.

She looked up and saw Michael, and found herself compelled to attend to what he said before she could speak a word.

“I have come to do you a service,” said Michael, with a simply truthful but authoritative manner, “but what I tell you to save so much harm befalling, I shall expect you to keep to yourself. You will find it better to do so. Hearing what I have heard this morning makes me determine to tell you what I’d much rather not be the first to mention. When you hear what it is, and when you remember I want to hire myself to Mr. Ambray, you’ll see that what I ask is natural. This is what I wish to let you know—George Ambray will never marry your niece. You have no need to be hard upon them on that score. As I said, I do not choose to be

the first to bring this sort of news up from London—I came by it in a round-about sort of way. Let it reach here in its own time and manner, by some other news-carrier than me, who want to please my new master and not to have my head broken, as I should be like enough if I'm the first to say such a thing at the High Mills."

"And, pray, what sharities am I to have for the truth o' such a statement?" inquired Mrs. Moon, hiding the satisfaction on her face by stooping to alter the arrangement of Ma'r S'one's logs on the fire.

"Any assurances that inquiries into my character at my village, and at the mills where I worked, can give you, you're heartily welcome to," answered Michael in a careless tone, "but I warn you, Mrs. Moon, that if the Ambrays get a guess at the truth, they'll—that is, Miss Nora will—have no more to say to you. From

what I've seen, the short time I've been here, I know that it's the thoughts of George only that makes her submit to be dependent on you, or to take anything from you. She looks on the property as *his*, not yours; but if she guessed that George was—that he could never marry her, I know well, by what I've seen and heard, she'd not touch another penny of it. She'd stick to the old folks, and work for them and keep 'em from want, if she wore out her life to do it."

Michael was for once in his life saying a little more than he really knew, yet an instinctive perception of Nora Ambray's character told him this would be so with her almost as clearly as actual experience could have told him.

Mrs. Moon really knew better than Michael did the truth of what he said. Knowing it so well, she suffered as he said it, for it stung the one affection of her heart with sharp jealousy to be reminded

that her favourite would cling to the old miller in his beggary rather than to her in her wealth, if George were no longer true.

“When you said,” continued Michael, “that you would leave the Mills as they were before if Miss Ambray gave up George, I half made up my mind to tell you what I knew, for your own sake as well as the young lady’s and the miller’s.”

“Well, I caan’t say but what it’s natural enough as you should speak,” said Mrs. Moon, “and of course I can understand your feelin’s on the subjec’ of not being the first to bring unwelcome news—though I caan’t say as it’s unwelcome to me, as you may p’r’aps have found out, for John Ambray seems to have confided *everything* to you.”

Michael saw enough in her face and heard enough in her altered voice to hope that he might now leave her to her own reflections with every chance of good for the fate of the High Mills.

He therefore modestly disclaimed knowing "everything," and wished her good day in a way that made her afterwards speak of him as "not at all bad-mannered—that man of Ambray's."

Scarcely ten minutes after he had left, Ma'r S'one arrived at the miller's cottage with a note from his mistress to John Ambray, begging for a few minutes' conversation with Nora immediately.

Michael went to the mill, and receiving no call to dinner, and being still left to himself long on in the afternoon, began to fear his communication had not had the effect he expected it to have on Mrs. Moon.

CHAPTER XVI.

MUTUAL MISGIVINGS.

“ My deep of life, I know,
Is unavailing e’en to poorly show.”

BROWNING.

MICHAEL’S existence was apparently forgotten by all Lamberhurst till four in the afternoon, when Ambray burst the mill-door open, calling his name.

“ Michael Swift ! what on earth have you done with yourself all day ? Hollo there ! Swift ! ”

As the miller looked round on entering, it seemed to him a good week’s work had been done.

His grey eyes lit with hearty approbation, but, falling on his new servant, became instantly hard and suspicious.

As Michael came forward, his face pale, his hair flattened close to his brows by the sweat of his hard work and the pressure of his cap, which he now held in his hand, there was something in his look and attitude which struck Ambray as being almost abject.

The miller immediately put his hard work to the balance against him.

He stood, looking him full and steadily in the face, with undisguised severity.

When Michael understood the look, he quailed more, and caught hold of the steps.

“Look here, Michael Swift,” said Ambray. “Look me in the face, and tell me you are not keeping anything back that if I knew it would prevent my taking you.”

Michael remained quite motionless for some time.

At last he raised his eyes with difficulty, showing Ambray nothing in them but the simplest honesty and sorrow.

“Master,” he answered with much effort, “I shall tell you nothing of the kind. I don’t know you well enough yet to know what might or might not prevent your taking me. All you have any right to ask is for a good character of me. If you don’t trust what I gave you to read—you have only to write to the man who has put his name and address on it. I have never done a dishonest thing in my life. I have no more to say for myself.”

“Would to God everybody could say as much,” Ambray retorted quickly, his doubts dispersed by the light that flashed from Michael’s weary eyes as he spoke; —“and with as much truth as I believe you can. You will have a master given to suspicion if you come here as my servant—I don’t disguise that from you. I’ve had enough to make my right hand doubt my left. But come. I must tell you that Phillips’s agreement is torn up—done for. My niece has won the day.

The mill and the grist both secured for three months certain, and how much longer depends on you."

"This is good news, master," answered Michael, turning away to tighten the knot in one of the bags hanging down from the shafts. Deep gratitude and relief had brought the blood to his face more eagerly than he cared for Ambray to see.

"Shake hands on it, man," cried Ambray, kindling under the influence of his father's old port, which he had been drinking freely at the farm.

Michael turned and stretched out his hand heartily, but instantly withdrew it again as if it had been stung.

"No," he stammered, confused, but resolute, "not till you know me better, master."

"What," cried Ambray, "you bear malice, do you?"

"I don't—I swear I don't—but I will not shake hands with you till you know me as—I wish you to know me."

“I know you already for a man one must pick and choose one’s words for,” said Ambray impatiently, “which I’m not used to for any man alive—so I warn you—but come away and have a glass of wine of a sort that’ll put you in a better temper.”

Michael smiled as he opened the door. He looked back with a glance of involuntary pride on the improvements he had made on the ground-floor.

Ambray looked too and nodded.

“Very well indeed,” he said, “and you can fetch the corn at once. Ma’r S’one is to have it ready for you down in the old oast house.”

CHAPTER XVII.

MA'R S'ONE AND THE CALVES.

“ He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.”

COLERIDGE.

THE day's anxiety, suspense, and self-imposed toil had left Michael weary in body and soul.

His secretly cherished hope grew faint as the brightness of the chill March day, as he walked towards Buckholt.

His words had had the effect he wished them to have ; but was that all ? he wondered. What harm might they not do him if repeated to Nora or the miller ? How could he be sure that Mrs. Moon

might not repeat them during some of the discussions that by all accounts were becoming more and more frequent between the High Mills and the farm?

As he drew near the house, Michael saw, by the peaceful look of everything about it, that the administration of justice was over for the day. Even the old dog whose death-warrant had been given was there trespassing again, and welcomed Michael into the yard.

Ma'r S'one was there sitting by the low pen full of calves scarcely a month old, in whose society he was taking his early tea.

There was an air of peace and innocence about the simple little picture that made it seem as balm to Michael's sorrowful eyes.

He looked at it for some time, then approached the pen, and leant his arms upon it. Ma'r S'one's elbow, as he cut his bread with a clasp-knife, came just over

the top of the pen, and was causing a soft, dreamy contention among the velvety heads there, each of which sought to rub against it.

“You find these creatures pleasant company, Mr. Ma’r S’one,” said Michael, after watching a little while.

“That they be, sir,” replied Ma’r S’one, looking down at them tenderly. “I’d leiver get my vittles with ’em than up at the Team any day, though it’s mighty improvin’ there sometimes, bein’ gen’ly a scollerd there as can read the noos-paper right arf without spellin’; but then it’s gen’ly ’bout murders, and I caan’t abide murders—they makes me creep, they do. ‘’Cline our ’erts,’ I say, ‘t’ keep this la’!’”

Michael was gazing vacantly into a sun-blinded velvety face that, baffled in its attempts to reach Ma’r S’one, had come to be fondled by the stranger. At Ma’r S’one’s last words, Michael’s

eyes dilated and swam, his hands clutched each other over the side of the pen, and a hard breath came labouring from him, with the words—

“Amen, Ma'r S'one, Amen!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MILL IN ORDER.

“The sun rides high, and fav’ring gales
Now seize and turn the cumbrous sails.”

AMBRAY rose the next day about breakfast-time in feverish spirits, and nothing could keep him from going up the field far enough to see the mill, with Fleetfoot and the waggon at the door.

A strong north wind was blowing—the sun made all the fresh downs look yellow—the mill-sails swept round against the bluest sky of the year. Michael’s face came and went at the windows, appearing from that distance, as he smiled out at

the miller, a very sun of brightness and content.

Old Guarder, the mill dog, ran incessantly to and fro between Michael and his master, and did his best to keep Fleetfoot from wasting his oats through a hole in his nose-bag by barking at him from all sides, and even mounted to the driver's seat in front of the waggon to try whether his voice would have more weight from that place of authority.

Ambray and his wife went together to the mill in the afternoon to see the improvements Michael had already made there.

Michael, looking down from the stone floor, saw them standing by the meal-bin watching the meal as it came pouring down.

The mill was going so fast that it came down warmer than usual.

Old Ambray took some up in his cold, trembling fingers, and felt it with an exquisite pleasure.

“Here it comes once more, old girl,” Michael heard him say, in a choking voice; “plenty and warm, ay, warm from the Almighty’s hand!”

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MILLER STILL SUSPECTS MICHAEL.

“But ever after, the small violence done
Rankled in him and ruffled all his heart,
As the sharp wind that ruffles all day long
A little bitter pool about a stone
On the bare coast.”

TENNYSON.

AMBRAY had never forgotten that Michael had refused to shake hands with him. He was a man who was suspicious of enthusiasm. He could understand and honour a man doing his duty honestly and to the full; but such work as Michael gave for wages, which, as the miller said to his wife, “the man had not yet seen the colour of,” was a marvel and almost a trouble to him.

Work that went beyond duty was regarded by him as a kind of conscience-offering.

It was Michael's duty to give his best attention to the grindstone, to turn all winds he might to good account, to keep the mill clean and free from damp, to carry the meal and flour to the villages and farms from which it had been ordered, to be civil and obliging to his master and his master's wife, and to be considerate of the age and nerves of two such valued and venerable servants as Fleetfoot and Guarder. A grinder who neglected any one of these things would have fallen into great disfavour with Ambray.

But here was a man, who, not content with making good use of the day and the day winds, must needs spend many of his nights also, laying in wait to catch and yoke to his master's service each wind that moaned across the dark and solitary downs, or came sighing up the valley, moist and heavy from the sea.

On breezeless days, Michael devoted his time to the cultivation of a piece of ground belonging to the mills, and lying between Ambray's cottage and a pasture-field of Buckholt Farm.

The half-wild, half-barren state in which this had lain for the last five years had troubled Ambray sorely, being a constant theme for Mrs. Moon's calm satire, and a cause of dissension between himself and George; for George had disliked gardening as much as "millerling," and his father's strength was greatly overtaxed by the mill alone.

It was therefore no small pleasure and triumph to Ambray to see, and have others see, his unprofitable little wilderness thus brought to order and use; and claiming its small, sweet share in the universal bloom and promise of the spring.

All April possessed no touch of green so fair to his eyes as the buds that opened on this spot, nor any note of music so

sweet in his ears as the singing of the birds above the soil Michael had cleared and refreshed.

Yet, as he crept along, leaning on his stick, wrapt up, and keeping as much as possible in the patches of sunshine, he would watch Michael at his work with more suspicion than gratitude.

Sometimes Michael would look up, and meet his strange gaze with eyes so perfectly frank and honest that the miller felt ashamed of himself, and would go home and abuse his wife for not having provided a better supper for Michael.

But once or twice Michael had encountered his master's look in a very different manner—his eyes had turned to the earth, sick and confused, his hand had trembled on the spade. Then Ambray had looked at him hard—he was not a merciful, though he was a just man. He had looked at him as if he would search out the secrets of his soul, and Michael,

when he next sat down to eat in the old people's presence, knew that they were regarding him as one who had come into a strange place to hide him from the shame of some dishonest act.

Sometimes Michael bore this treatment with exceeding patience and meekness; sometimes he chafed under it with subdued but visible passion, dashing the mill keys down when he went to bed, and treading the floor as if he would grind it to powder.

These fits of temper did more to reassure his master as to the wholesome state of his soul than anything else; yet Michael hated himself whenever he had been possessed by one of them even for a minute, and did his utmost to retain that very gentleness and forbearance which roused the miller's suspicions.

But more and more often, as the spring came on, Michael saw upon his master's face the look which said as plainly as look

could say—"I shall find you out soon, my man; you cannot deceive me long."

Yet in spite of all his obstinate suspicion, scarcely a day passed without Ambray deriving some ray of comfort, cheerfulness, and renewed love of life from that very study of Michael's character to which his suspicion moved him and which strengthened his suspicion.

The glow of a spirit more healthful, more honest, more fervent than any that had lived near him before was warming and comforting him, and he knew not whence the warmth and comfort came. It was the sunshine of the spring, the prospect of his son's return, Nora's bright, brief visits, the certainty of keeping the High Mills for yet three months more—anything, in fact, but the companionship and service of the man whom he was determined to "find out."

CHAPTER XX.

NEWS OF GEORGE.

“Hope deferred maketh the heart sick : but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.”

PROVERBS.

SEVERAL days passed without bringing Ambray any reason to repent of his bargain.

He was much within doors during that time, the weather being changeable and his asthma bad ; but he heard from all quarters of the industry and civility of his servant.

When the wind served, Michael worked by night as well as by day.

Far and wide over the country, and far and wide on the sea, people began to look

for the light at the High Mills every windy night.

The little waggon, with Michael standing a few yards in front of it, smiling at Fleetfoot's slow advance with a kind of placid despair, became one of the most familiar sights on the road and in the lanes about Lamberhurst.

He had as yet made no friends but Ma'r S'one; and there were days, when Ambray was confined to his bed, that Michael passed without speaking or being spoken to from morning till night; and this to one who had not been used to walk a dozen yards without receiving a greeting from familiar lips was a very strange experience. It was the more so to Michael, because of his having always been possessed by a strong interest in his fellow-creatures.

Sometimes in the spring evenings, when Ambray was suffering more than usual, and his wife scarcely left his side a minute,

and when there was nothing doing at the mill, Michael found his time of leisure—brief as it was—hang very heavy on his hands.

Once, when he looked in at the Team by way of a change, the company, unable in his presence to think of anything but the High Mills and their owners, conversed all the evening about “Ma’s Garge” and his feats in running and wrestling, his handsome face, his good humour, his pleasant word to everybody, his popularity among rich and poor, his looked-for return.

Michael never spent another evening at the Team.

Nora rode over nearly every morning. Her visit at Stone Crouch was coming to an end, and her aunt was busy with preparations for her return.

Michael dreaded this return, yet longed for it. The sadness and agitation he suffered in her presence had a strange

fascination in it. One moment he found himself longing that he might meet her, and the next he would be doing his utmost to avoid her.

Even if he chanced to be seated with Mrs. Ambray at dinner or tea, when she came he would disappear at once, leaving not only the room, but the house, and sometimes while it was raining heavily.

The Ambrays were always too much excited by her visits to take any notice of Michael; but Nora saw and noticed him, and wondered he should have so much delicacy.

One morning, Michael had gone to Buckholt Farm with the old miller, to ask for permission to make some serious alteration in the works of the mill.

Mrs. Moon was standing in her usual attitude of consideration, her fingers on her chin, when she suddenly started and ran towards the door.

Nora had come, and Michael no sooner

saw her entering the room with her aunt, than he knew some great change had come over her.

The strained, wan look had gone from her eyes, which seemed to fill the room with light and sweetness as they came into it.

The sight of this new joy and peace in her startled Michael, and filled him with a vague alarm, and set him questioning himself fearfully as to what it could mean.

Seeing Ambray, Nora went straight to him, and laying her hands on his breast, looked up into his face, and smiled such a smile as Michael never before dreamed of.

The miller also looked half afraid of Nora's happiness. Placing a trembling hand on her shoulder, he uttered her name, half questioningly half reproachfully—

“Nora!”

She bowed her head twice, as if unable

to do more, then laid her cheek against him, and laughed and sobbed out—

“Yes, yes; we will kill the fatted calf and make ready. The dear, dear prodigal is found; and I know that he will soon be here.”

In the mill where Michael had first worked, the machinery which regulated the sails to the variations of the wind was reached at an arm's length up the grinding-floor wall.

Now, the habit of stopping noise and confusion by stretching up to touch this had so grown into him, that in any mental tumult, even when he was far away from the mill, Michael would often throw his arm up its full length against the wall, door, or tree he might be standing near, and feel with his fingers, as if he thought that something should hang within reach by which he could restore calmness and order to his mind.

When Nora, after one vain attempt to keep her joy from bursting upon Ambray in his sorrow, like a too vivid gleam of light on eyes that have been long in the dark, gave way to it with the twofold force of tears and laughter, first making with this rain and sunshine a bow of promise on his darkness, then more than fulfilling the promise with her words, Michael's arm was flung up against the wall, and his fingers groped over the slippery oak with a passionate and desperate persistency.

What had she said? The prodigal was found? Whom could she mean, save George? But how, then, could she say that he was found and was coming home?

Like the builders of Babel, Michael's thoughts were struck with confusion.

Was he, like them, to be shown by some miracle that the work he had begun, and in which lay all the peace the world could give him, was too daring to be permitted? Was this hope, this vein of

gold which he had found and followed in the very pit of despair, to prove but a deceitful thing, that should lead him deeper into the same pit?

As he asked himself this, a sudden change came over him. The first throng of wild thoughts Nora's words had sent rushing into his brain were banished as cowardly—as base.

What had he been fearing? Michael asked himself. The very thing he ought most to hope for—if it were possible. Could he not bear it? Could he not rejoice at it?

His eyes, full of a desperate and tender courage, looked at the doorway, and he told his God he *could* endure fearlessly the sight of a Lazarus-like face if it might appear there,—the sound of a Lazarus-like voice if it might speak answering to a father's and a lover's cry of welcome.

Yes, he *could* endure it even though the face and voice spoke of him such things

as should make the man at whose feet he had come to offer a life's service, and all the country in which he was so helpless a stranger, turn upon him and without trial hurry him before that Judgment which he feared so much less than man's.

By Mrs. Moon's clock Michael experienced such thoughts, such sufferings but for one moment: by his own face they might have had possession of him for ten years.

During this moment Nora remained with her face resting where she had hidden it, against Ambray's, when she saw every one looking at her as she cried out her news.

Ambray stood looking down at her. He had taken his hand from her shoulder, and both his hands and his face seemed eloquent of an instinct warning him against taking her and the hope and joy of which she told, to his longing heart.

At the instant when Michael, with his arm thrown up against the wall, was

trying to realize how much he could endure if George might indeed come back, the miller caught sight of a letter crushed in Nora's hand as it rested on his shoulder.

He recognized the writing.

The patient suspense and doubt passed from his face. He held Nora off, and spoke to her gently and half bantering, as if his own faith in his son had never been shaken, and he only had *her* joy to think of.

"He has written to you, then, the bad boy? He has written at last!"

Had such a face as Michael had been trying to picture really appeared before him, his own could not have shown more terrified amazement than it did when Nora looked up and answered proudly and delightedly—

"Yes, he has written to me!"

"I may read it? I may read my son's letter?" Ambray at once entreated and demanded.

She put it into his hands, holding them a moment as she said—

“I stopped to ask as usual, feeling so sick of the little shop. And when they gave me this just now, *I* don’t know what I did. I emptied my pocket for the children, and I think I gave Tommy my whip; yes, that I did.”

“Oh, Nara! Nara!” cried Mrs. Moon. “Did ever anybody see such a girl! I gave a guinea for it on’y laast Jenuwery,” she added, appealing to Michael as the only person likely to be unengrossed by George’s letter.

But Michael’s eyes were fixed upon his master as he perused the letter, which he read aloud—

“MY DEAR NORA,

“I needn’t tell *you*, surely, though father’s last letter was very strange, that my apparent neglect in writing home has been from simple reluctance to do so till

I had something more promising to say of myself and work.

“I do wish you would persuade father not to write to me in that style. I know I’ve not got on as we all expected I should do, but, from all I hear from fellows who’ve begun art as I have, I’m no worse than many others. It seems necessary to be made disappointed and sick of the thing before you succeed.

“At first the very smell makes one feel an artist. You like it amazingly. Turpentine’s not so very bad, and megilp’s delicious! While that sort of thing lasts you may be sure you’re no good. Wait till you hate it, find it sickening, as I do now, and then when you’ve got your nose well ground down to it you may look about you, and see your work cut out before you a bit. Do you know, I was actually going to make my own colours at first, Nora,—thought a deal about Van Eyck—and perhaps you’ll scarcely believe me

when I tell you that three ‘muffs’ out of four go in for that kind of bosh at first. But it’s a fact nevertheless. Now, I can’t tell you how grateful I feel to the artists’ colourman, and how defiantly confident I feel of being able to get all I want no further off than Rathbone Place and Long Acre. Yes, I’ve cut all that humbug now, and know that when I can *draw* I can *paint*. So I am getting on a little. The knowledge of half-a-dozen weak places in your picture dodged yesterday, to be come at with a shudder to-day, turpentine on your brain, and fellows distracting and mystifying you, who know *so* much and do *so* little—*how* they make me miss the sweet faith and pride in me at home which is almost enough of itself to make me earn self-respect.

“Dear Nora, what wouldn’t I give sometimes to be crossing the Longbridge field, in the evening—to meet somebody—to

begin the hundred and sixty-eighth sketch (is it?) of the old black mill!

“I have got a capital little model for one of the figures in my picture (‘The Wayfarers’). Indeed, I have two such models for it as I never expected to find. Unfortunately, as these poor creatures are both blind, I shall—as you’ll understand—be obliged to change our idea of the picture a little ; not so very much, though. Most of the fellows I told you about think it an improvement rather than otherwise. And these two treasures—the man a mass of rags and cunning indescribable, the girl a gem—they quite give me fresh hope and confidence. Only, for his own sake, dear Nora, don’t let father write again like that. He seems to think I’m in love with the life here—I only wish he knew what it is! What I’d give to wake and hear the old sounds again—the crackling of the faggots being broken for the fires, and the old

draw-wells creaking—instead of these infernal street cries !

“ Nora, darling, whether I succeed or not, I have determined on one thing, and that is to live down home as you always wished. How I trust you wish it still ! Father hints you are changed through what he calls my neglect ; but your own dear letter tells me this is not so. I do wish you would prevail upon him not to write in that way. He can’t imagine the effect it has upon me. Don’t let them turn you against me. Nora, my own dearest, if I ever *do* cease to think of you as I told you I thought of you when I cut the names, I should indeed be too base to be forgiven by you. Believe in my possible success a little longer if you can—but in success or failure, believe me,

“ Yours ever faithfully,

“ GEORGE AMBRAY.

“ P.S.—To show you the effect those

letters of father's have on me I must tell you a dream I had about him last night. I thought something had happened that had offended him hopelessly—some crime of mine I suppose it was ; yet I was on my way up the White Lane trying to get home. I could hear the mill, and the sound made me try to hurry on towards it. But I could not stir. My feet seemed turned to stone, and the more I tried the heavier they grew. Then I dreamt that people from here passed me, and I knew they were going to tell father all that I had been myself too cowardly to tell him. Yet it was such a strange feeling I hardly know how to describe it ; but there I was, trying to shout to them to let me go first, but either I had no voice or they *wouldn't* heed me, for they didn't. And I can't describe to you the agony it was to see them reach the mills, and to hear my father crying out at me."

“Well,” said the miller, in a tone of tender reproach, “I didn’t think the lad could even dream that I’d ever hear him slandered behind his back. But come! Isn’t it the right sort o’ letter? What do *you* say, Jane Moon?”

“Well, John Ambray,” answered his sister-in-law, caressing her double chin, and speaking in a calmly reflective but puzzled tone that exasperated the miller, “I caan’t say much ’cept as it’s Garge—Garge from first to laarst. *Intentions! arl intentions.*”

The miller shut his eyes and mouth as if to keep his passion prisoner, and when he had apparently turned some inner key upon it, he said gently to Nora, while something glittered at the ends of his white eyelashes—

“Why, it’s enough to make you jealous, Nora—he’s writing to you, yet here’s ‘father’ in mostly every line. Ay, my child, this *is* comfort indeed. You are

right—how can we do enough for *such* a prodigal? We have no robe to put on him—except it's his little old white coat that hangs in the mill—well, that was a garment of innocence, God knows—and he might do worse than put it on again. We've no rings for his fingers, but we will comfort him—won't we, my child?"

Nora fell into his arms with a cry, and he clasped her to his heart, trembling very much.

A hand—too heavy to be Nora's—touched his shoulder. He looked round and saw Michael with one arm thrown up against the wall, while with the other he pointed to the letter Ambray still held.

He was very pale, his eyes were wild and blood-shot, but had a gentle expression in them. As Ambray faced him he seemed unable to speak, though he still pointed to the letter.

"What now, Michael Swift? What have *you* to say on the matter?" asked

the miller encouragingly, thinking that perhaps Nora's presence confused the man, and not noticing half the strangeness of his look.

"The date," Michael said, speaking with his breath, and without voice. Then aloud, and with a vehemence that had solemnity as well as passion in it, he repeated—

"The date, I say!—the date! Do you read a letter like that, and feel it like that, and not care to know when it was written and what has happened—I mean what time has passed—since?"

"The date?" said Ambray, looking at the letter. "Why, George hardly ever *did* date his letters, and I don't suppose he's dated this. No, not a sign of a date. But what's the matter with you, man? A date's not a thing of life or death, is it?"

He turned fully, and looked at Michael, and Nora also looked at him in a sort of vague annoyance and surprise.

Michael lowered his head, and dragged his arm slowly from the wall.

“I—I beg your pardon,” he said, scarcely audibly. “I only wished to—I—I myself once made a great mistake through—through this same thing. A letter that——”

“There, there! of course you meant well,” Ambray interrupted him; “I know that. Where are you going?”

Michael was gliding quietly past him.

Without turning his face towards him, Michael answered gently—

“To the mill, master. I am not wanted here now, I think.”

CHAPTER XXI.

LAMBERHURST AT CHURCH.

“ At church, in silks and satins new,
With hoop of monstrous size ;
She never slumbered in her pew—
But when she shut her eyes.”

GOLDSMITH.

MICHAEL passed such a night as he had known but once before in all his life.

He felt that some cruel, mysterious hand must be working against him and his cherished purpose. How else had this letter come ?

To increase his trouble, Mrs. Moon sent for him in the evening just as he was locking up the mill.

“ I wish to know,” said she, when

Michael came into her parlour, "how I am to give any belief at all to your statement, in the face of such a letter as that from Garge Ambray?"

Michael looked at her a moment in silence, half gloomy, half contemptuous.

When he answered her, it was with an impatient, almost defiant, turn of his head, as he went towards the door.

"That letter, Mrs. Moon," he said, "was written long ago; but pray take it for whatever you think it's worth. As for me, I've said all I have to say on the matter. *Nothing* can happen to change the truth of what I said. I wish you good night."

Nora came home about the middle of April. On the same afternoon that she arrived with her boxes at the farm, Ma'r S'one toiled up to the miller's cottage, holding—with the edge of his smock between it and his fingers—a little note. It was an invitation to Ambray and his

wife to drink tea with their niece and Mrs. Best.

The miller was for refusing it, but Mrs. Ambray and Michael overruled him, and prevailed upon him to let Ma'r S'one carry back a grateful acceptance.

After that day Michael never left the mills without taking a long look from the little terrace to ascertain that Nora was not on her way to or from the cottage.

When he reached the door he stood still and listened, and, if he heard her voice within,—as he did several times—he would return to the mill, or go and work in the garden till she left.

The first time that he saw her face after her return was at church.

She and Mrs. Moon now sat alone in the large old pew, where Ambray used once to sit with his father and mother, his old grandfather, and all his brothers, while he was yet too small to know the weariness of having to dangle his feet a few inches

above the hassock they could not reach, while indeed he was still too little to dangle them at all, but could only turn, direct towards the pulpit, a pair of tiny soles, which perhaps pleaded his small cause eloquently enough, by thus simply and mutely offering evidence to their very recent and slight acquaintance with the earth, among the sinners of which their owner was called upon thus early to proclaim himself.

The grey head which now bent beside Ma'r S'one's and others as lowly, on the most backward of the free seats, told a very different story,—offered very different evidence as to its need of mercy.

It was during the sermon, when Mrs. Best slept soundly with her fat hands folded on the large pocket-handkerchief spread over her claret-coloured satin dress, and when Ma'r S'one and a curly-headed plough-boy, between which two Michael sat, were requiring constant reminders

from each shoulder that he was neither a pew wall nor a bundle of hay,—it was at this time that he ventured to look at Nora.

He had scarcely done so when his eyes fell, full of perplexity and wonder.

Why was she so pale, so different from when he had last seen her face in the parlour at Buckholt Farm?

He dared not look again, because her eyes had been gazing straight towards the seat which he shared with the Ambrays and her aunt's servants, yet he would have given much to know whether her face was indeed so altered as it had seemed to him; whether it really wore that look of vague suffering, that desire for divine guidance and help, a desire which had appeared to him to be expressed there as humbly as it was on Ma'r S'one's face, when he prayed that his heart might be inclined to keep his Master's laws.

If he had been right,—if her face had really looked so,—what had caused the change?

Had George Ambray's letter, read many times, begun to have a different meaning to her at last?

Was she beginning to suspect that something worse than debt, and long absence without explanation, had wrung from him those expressions of repentance which had so moved her, and gladdened his father's heart? Had Mrs. Moon hinted at what he had told her about George?

While he was trying for courage to look once again at Nora's face so as to be better able to answer himself these questions, the voice which Mrs. Best had found so soothing ceased; and she woke with a start, and fixed instantly a look at once appreciative and critical on the old vicar, as if, on the whole, she approved of the sermon, but could decidedly point out a flaw or two in it, if closely questioned on the subject.

Ma'r S'one also woke, sighing and shaking his head, and murmuring very self-reproachfully,

"'Cline our 'erts," and finishing his prayer upon his knees.

The plough-boy, too, lifted his curly head from Michael's shoulder, turning upon him as he did so a look of surly indignation, as if requesting him not to take such a liberty again.

Now come the blessing, the silence, the rush of fresh air and sunshine through the door the beadle has noiselessly opened; mysterious sounds among the union boys as they are trying to persuade each other, by nudges and kicks, to begin the general uprising; mysterious sounds, also, among the old men in the free seats,—a gentle fumbling for sticks and crutches, patting and coaxing of stiff, gaitered legs, that apparently have mistaken this for their last journey here, and gone to sleep.

Silence again: then suddenly, and at its

full, the noise of the rising of a large parish in a little church; the mingling of rustling silk and creaking old limbs, the roll of the organ, the light fall of well-to-do feet, and the grinding and clattering of myriads of little hobnails.

Down sails Mrs. Moon, the richest woman in the parish,—placid, self-conscious, doffed to and nodded to by high and low.

Will he see Nora once more? Michael wonders. No: the crowd hides her, the Ambrays are waiting for him at the tiny side door.

One more glance across the motley little mass moving all one way, across the smart bonnets, the files of tiny corduroyed figures; but it is a vain glance.

He sees no more of Nora, and in another instant finds himself again by his old master, the old duties, the old sickening necessity of listening to the old story pressing upon him.

How sick he feels this morning of these

glittering downs, and the old mills that seem to look loweringly upon him from the hill as he toils on towards them, supporting his master, who leans so ungrudgingly upon him, because he thinks his arm unworthy of giving him support !

How sick, too, of the thoughts of seeing again that door of George's room standing open to show him, directly he enters the miller's house, its almost awful air of expectancy and waiting !

CHAPTER XXII.

APRIL EVENINGS.

“My ear is open like a greedy shark
To catch the tunings of a voice divine.”

“Your accents bland
Still sounded in my ear, when I no more
Could hear your footstep touch the gravelly floor.”

KEATS.

WHEN he had been a month at Lamberhurst, Michael had a letter from home. It was short and cool enough, but he was as agitated over it as a little schoolboy whose dimpled fingers tremble round the seal of his mother's first letter.

Michael's letter was from his father, and contained the key to what had been

a very great mystery to him—the undated letter from George received by Nora.

“The Green, Thames Dutton,
“April 2nd.

“DEAR MICHAEL,

“I am very glad to hear you got the place you was after, and your mother is glad you are quite well and comfortable. We are pretty well, thank God, except for rheumatis in the same leg as before. I posted a letter the day after you left which I found directed but not stamped in the pocket of poor Grant’s coat. We supposed you meant to take it with you, as it was directed to the same place as you are at, and forgot it. I dare say it will have reached all right. Your mother pertic’lerly hopes you go to church reg’ler, and has your things mended weekly, as your brother Tom has just come home in a shocking state.

“Your affectionate father,

“JOSEPH SWIFT.”

Michael felt that there was a great necessity for this letter to be destroyed; but he could not do it.

It was read, laughed and sighed over, as if it had been the most brilliant and moving epistle that ever was penned, and when it had become worn almost to tatters in his pocket, it was placed between the leaves of Michael's Bible, where it remains to this day.

One evening, when the old miller had gone to bed, and Michael sat alone with Mrs. Ambray, concentrating all his vast strength into his effort to put her thread through the eye of her needle, they heard a step across the little garden.

"Nora!" declared Mrs. Ambray, and rose briskly.

The door was opened before she had time to reach it, and Nora came in, closed it, and met her aunt with a weary and gentle manner that Michael somehow felt without looking up.

Too much absorbed in the mere sense of her presence, and too unself-conscious to remember he would be noticed at all, Michael continued to make thrusts at the needle's eye, though his heart seemed to give his arm great strong jerks that kept the thread very wide of its destination.

He did not know that Nora could not help smiling at him, till he guessed it from Mrs. Ambray's laugh, as she good-naturedly snatched both needle and thread from him, exclaiming,

"Come, bless the man! Why, I wouldn't give my eyes for yours, handsome as they are."

Michael, with a quick glance, half merry half reverential, at Nora, rose, and in somewhat clumsy precipitation retreated upstairs to his own room.

"Why, he's gone up in the dark," cried Mrs. Ambray. "Why, Michael!"

They heard him returning, and Mrs.

Ambray met him at the foot of the stairs with a candle. "You must have a good conscience, man," she said, laughing as she gave it into his hands.

Michael, in venturing one more glance at Nora, had not clearly heard her words, and immediately recollecting himself, asked with some confusion,

"I—I—must have—what?"

"A clear conscience," repeated Mrs. Ambray, "going up in the dark like that."

Nora's eyes were turned carelessly towards the broad, dark, honest face of this man, whom she was beginning to notice had an air of unaffected primitive grandeur wherever and in whatever attitude she saw him, and she could not help wondering, almost unconsciously, at the change that came over it at her aunt's words. She could have understood a natural start, implying that Michael's conscience was no clearer than most people's, or a self-satisfied smile, implying

it was as clear as he could reasonably desire it. But the change that passed over his face then expressed neither of these feelings. It was more like a sudden passion of sadness seizing him.

His eyes looked towards her with the helpless, wistful look of the eyes of dumb creatures—expressive yet inexpressible—the small curve of lip, showing through the dark beard, quivered, the pale cheeks and great forehead became a shade more pale, then the eyes were almost shut, with a start—the face fell a little forward, and Mrs. Ambray, unconscious of anything, closed the door on it.

“What an immensity of expression is wasted on common, handsome people,” said Nora, after the effect of the little staircase picture had vanished with Michael’s candle. “Now, I’m sure that man might be a poet or some such sensitive being, to judge by the constant play

of expression on his face. What is it? I suppose the truth is the face *is* handsome, isn't it? And beauty is a magnifier of expression. Michael probably never read a line of poetry in print or nature, and as to sensitiveness, I dare say his soul's as hard-mouthed as Aunt Jane's cob."

"Nonsense, Nora," answered Mrs. Ambray, rather sharply. "Michael has very keen, quick feelings. One can hurt or please him with what one says before the words are out o' one's mouth. He's all he seems, is Michael, and a great deal more too."

"Then," said Nora in a softer voice, "he has some great grief."

"That he has, poor fellow!" answered her aunt; "he's been shamefully jilted by some minx of a girl or other. I often wish I could tell her a bit of my mind. Sometimes I think he'll never get over it."

"He doesn't look ill?"

"Not always; but, Nora, I don't know

what to make of him—he's *too* good. Upon my word, my dear," she said, her eyes filling as she laid her hand on the astonished girl's—"don't laugh at me, but this man is for all the world like those sort o' children as we say are too sweet o' spirit to live—he is, indeed."

"Does he often look so sad as he did just now?" asked Nora.

"Yes, often—and yet the least thing will make him happy as a king. A kind word from your uncle makes him as if he'd got springs to his feet all day, and di'monds in those black eyes of his. He's a mystery, is that man."

Michael had been too greatly disturbed by the thought and the wild wish that Mrs. Ambray's words had awakened in him to hear, as he might otherwise easily have heard, these remarks upon himself.

The little staircase, being small and almost perpendicular, was a sort of ear-

trumpet to Michael's room, rather than a means of keeping off sound from the parlour below. The door at the foot had a gap all round it, and Michael's room had no door at all, but some old flour-sacks, stitched together, hanging there in place of one.

He had grown accustomed to hearing himself talked about by the miller and his wife after he had gone up to bed, and had given up throwing out hints that he could hear every word.

The miller would remember for some little time, and be more careful, but he was a man who said little, yet did not care to trouble about what he said, or how he said it. He therefore only grew irritated, and spoke louder when his wife said "hush!" and if his remark had been in Michael's dispraise, repeated it in a louder voice and with sundry additions, which pained or amused the lonely occupant of the attic, according to the mood that might be on him.

To-night Michael had come up in such excitement as to be unable for some time to hear or to remember that he could hear. Nora's voice, too, was still a little strange to him, and Mrs. Ambray was always careful to speak low.

For some minutes he had enough to do to conquer the panic that had seized him at the careless words Mrs. Ambray had spoken while his eyes had been on Nora's face, which he saw for the first time in the soft shade and star-like light of that sorrow which he understood so much better than she did herself.

Her blue soft eyes, resting that moment unconsciously on his face, in all their pathetic wonder at life, had made him tremble through all his soul—for he felt that they pleaded to him, without her knowledge, for the solution of the mystery that was gathering over her young heart and its hopes like a blighting mist over a garden of summer flowers.

Still agitated and steeped to the lips in new grief, Michael put out his candle, and sat with his arm on the sill of his open window.

The thick dew had frozen lightly—the moon was eagerly clear and fresh—the fruit trees hung their heavily-blossomed boughs, and shivered listlessly—lambs in the Buckholt meadows bleated with cold. All the soft new things of the spring seemed shiveringly and plaintively agreeing they had come too soon.

Michael remembered all that he looked out upon long years afterwards—for that night was one of deep importance in his strange history. He knew that it would be so; indeed, it seemed to him when he came up there and knew that Nora was where he could hear her voice, and by-and-by, when his ears grew used to that, her words also, he felt he should know what was as a matter of life and death to him—whether hers was a nature likely to

recover from the shock of a great calamity or one to be ruined by it.

The moment that he first allowed himself to draw in his face from the fresh night, and turn towards the sacks in the doorway, Mrs. Ambray was speaking.

She had none of that unrestrainable impetuosity of expression that the Ambrays all possessed, and Michael only heard a word or two of what she said. But when Nora answered her he heard distinctly, though the sweet flow of her voice was in danger of distracting him from her words, as the flow of a stream distracts the eye of one looking for the stones in its clear depths.

“I shall never forget,” she said, “the fright he gave me the first time I saw him, when he came over to Stone Crouch to tell me the mills were going to be let. They’re very uncomfortable beings, those people that have such overmuch expression. He was a good fellow to feel

your trouble, but his look when I came in! It was like a person's who had come with awful news."

"I don't think you'd have been so much surprised, Nora," said Mrs. Ambray, more loudly and sharply than usual, "if you'd known the trouble as he'd left behind him here—your uncle coughing himself to fits, and me here distracted, and none to look to but him. Ma'r S'one shook like a leaf when he brought up the news—and indeed I must say, Nora, I don't myself see such 'overmuchness' of feeling if a young man with parents of his own did feel and *show* his feelings at such a time. It isn't *every* young man," added the good soul, with a slight choking in her throat, "that looks on me as George does, as a mother deserving of *no* jot of respect and dooty. God knows *I'm* not tired yet of 'overmuch' feeling shown me."

"Dearest aunt, I didn't mean the man *felt* too much for you," explained Nora;

"I meant he showed more concern than he really felt. These great black and white faces always do."

"His *deeds* are what *I* judge by, Nora," answered Mrs. Ambray, still with some asperity. "I know *they* have expressed a sight more feeling than even his good honest face has."

"Well, well," said Nora, in a half beseeching, half laughing tone; "I beg your pardon, and his too."

"Hush!"

"Why? Can he hear?"

"No, he's sound enough asleep by this time, but you needn't wake him."

"Do you know, Aunt," said Nora, in an altered voice that made the angry flush die off Michael's cheek and his eye grow full of forgiveness and reverence, "I should have been almost glad to have proved this man of yours a hypocrite."

The dark eye flashed at the sacks again, demanding as Mrs. Ambray did in angry astonishment—

“Why, Nora, in the name o’ wonder?”

“Because,” answered Nora, “I would rather he had been anything than that he should help to drive me to the belief all life seems driving me to just now. Aunt, isn’t it true—find—in this world goodness—and there with it—bone of its bone, flesh of its flesh, you find—sorrow?”

She uttered the last words with such bitter vehemence, Michael rose, and his arm went up in the old way against the wall.

He was lost in a tumult of perplexity as to what her words could mean to her, and of horror as to what they meant to *him*, while the miller’s wife cried out entreatingly and soothingly,

“No, lassie, no! What! is this our Nora? Is this what they’ve taught our bright one in the grand, gay world?”

Michael heard the scund of a chair being pushed away, and guessed that George’s mother had risen, and was

caressing and comforting the girl tenderly and respectfully, as he had often seen her do when he had come into the cottage without knowing the visitor was there.

"Aunt," said Nora, in a voice half choked with tears, "I don't get on in what you call the grand, gay world. To me it is neither grand nor gay. I have been in it too long or not long enough to be happy in it. I understand it either too well or not at all."

"Oh, my poor child," said Mrs. Ambray with quiet but deep pain, "it's because you are not free in it. You are chained to us—you with your sweet face and your goodness and wealth that ought to make you the happiest of the happy—you are chained to that ungra—unlucky boy."

"You dear soul!" cried Nora, and Michael knew by her voice that she was smiling that tremulous delicious smile he knew so well, and that reminded him

of the rush of May sunlight over yellow fields. "Do you pity me for *that*? Ah! *would* you if you knew? If you knew the comfort it is to me to feel that *I* am not one of those I see struggling against each other, in what you call the world, for they hardly know what—something which when they get they are seldom satisfied with, so far as I can see—but I tell you I know too little about it. I am spoilt by my feeling of security and peace in such a home and such a life as I look to with George. I am made selfish by my own confidence and happiness. Really, aunt, you don't know how ungenerous and censorious I am. My poor father would say, that having my own ship safe in the harbour, I stand and condemn those who are still striving and fighting and wrecking each other to get in too. Dear aunt, never fear for my faithfulness to George—to you all—to the life we have talked of—believe me, whether

it's my fault or not, I can find no rest for the sole of my foot, but in the dear, dear old home."

Then Michael heard the two laughing and crying together, and knew that youth and generosity, and age and gratitude, had kissed each other—with murmurs of constancy and consolation and hope.

"After all, Nora," said the old voice presently, in a tone of solemn, sweet resignation, "it's only those as has misfortunes like us can know what *real* happiness is. Only fancy, my darling, the blessed woman among women I shall be when comes that boy in at that door."

"Yes, that's what I say," cried Nora joyously. "Ours, after all, is that sort of grief that may be melted like these spring frosts. And then everything will seem so astonishingly warm and sweet because we've fancied it must be winter. How I shall laugh at all I've feared and fretted—at the first glimpse of his face!"

“Yes, but think o’ *me*,” said the miller’s wife, who, like most people that habitually find their happiness in the happiness of others, was impressed with the superiority of *her* joy over theirs. “Think o’ *me* standing here, and seeing by your sweet face that you’re rewarded for all your goodness, and seeing his eyes looking round at me—like this—in his old way, when he’d come in late—as much as to say, ‘May I dare to look at father? Shall I catch it much?’ and then to see his—his—father turn and see him, and—ah!——”

The prospect of *that* meeting was too much for George’s long-suffering mother, and Michael heard a sound by which he knew the thin old arms had been cast upon the table to receive and hide the ecstatic old face.

Ma’r S’one now came to fetch his young mistress home, and Michael, like some

“seer in a trance,” saw them go away under the snowy pear trees.

He had sat listening to the swinging to of each gate from the High Mills to Buckholt, and to the age-smitten child-voice of Ma'r S'one telling Nora all that had happened at the farm during her absence, and when these sounds had ceased, could hardly realize that he had indeed had the insight he so coveted into this tender and faithful soul.

He sat for hours crushed with a sense of shame at what he felt his baseness in daring to have looked into so sacred a temple.

Yet again and again he dared to look into it, or perhaps he might have said he was compelled to do so, for now that Ambray habitually sickened of his weary days so as to be glad to begin his weary nights early by going to bed soon after dusk, Nora would come out of pity to sit with his wife, and Michael, when there

was no use in being at the mill, banished himself to his room with the sack door.

Sometimes he tried to be very honest, and whistled till his breath was gone, or till Mrs. Ambray called up the stairs—

“Bless the man! don’t make that noise—don’t! One can’t hear oneself speak!”

Nora did not come only to talk of George. She brought books, and read to the old woman, often for some hours together, and she talked out her thoughts about what she read, and Michael would declare to himself, “I thought book-writers the cleverest folk in the world; but this young lady goes beyond them. All she says about the books is better and higher than what the books say for themselves.” And Michael, not knowing that it is often easier to go beyond a great thought, when such is once expressed, than it is to approach it ever so distantly *before* it is expressed, began to look on

Nora as the very soul of wisdom and knowledge, as well as a marvel of love and filial devotion.

The world she opened to him by her reading, and her talking never lost for him her presence. It was with the light of her own thoughts that he looked upon everything she made known to him, and as she did, all unconsciously, make known so much that it was impossible for a large honest, though fallow, mind like Michael's to forget, her image in his soul became immovable.

He could not think of anything without pausing to wonder how *she* would think of it.

It was now that quite a new life began for him. Reading became a necessity. He made journeys to the Bay constantly for the books Nora had mentioned or read portions from.

Mrs. Ambray, whose favourite he was, was proud of this, and when he had gone to the mill, showed them to Nora, who

agreed that he was a "superior man," and sometimes felt half ashamed of permitting without a word his humble and reverential exit at her approach.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MICHAEL'S NIGHTLY TRIAL.

“ His heart beat awfully against his side
For power to speak, but still the ruddy tide
Stifled his voice and pulsed resolve away.”

KEATS.

No more letters, dated or undated, had arrived from George ; but as he had said that he should not write again until the fate of his pictures was decided, this caused no surprise or disappointment.

The loving and expectant hearts kept each other full of happy restlessness with the idea that he might arrive any day, any moment.

Every night Michael heard his master remonstrating against the house being shut up so early, and he knew he kept awake

an hour or more, sometimes many hours, after all was still and dark, straining his ear for the step, the knock, the voice, till his heavy eyelids fell and shut away the world and its vain hopes, and he was stilled with a foretaste of death's tranquillity.

Michael knew all this because the walls were so thin he could hear every word that was spoken below almost as well as if he were in the same room with the speaker. And often Ambray, long after all had been silent, would ask his wife if she did not think there was a sound like wheels or horses' feet coming up the White Lane, or tell her that Guarder had barked, or the gate had creaked.

There were times when the consciousness of these grey heads lying awake far into the night in such trembling and tender expectancy became almost unendurable to Michael.

Starting up, he would half dress himself and steal barefooted down the steep,

narrow stairs, stand with his palms against their door, and be within a breath of bursting it open and falling on his knees before them, his face scarcely needing language as an interpreter.

But before anything else was done, when only his noiseless feet had stood there, and his noiseless palms touched the door, he would turn and fly back, leaving upon the walls that shut in the stairs the prints of his moist hands dying away in the moonlight.

Back in the thin-walled solitude of his little room, where he was forced to be so quiet and careful, he would cast himself upon his bed, thanking God he had gone no further, and telling himself he must not, could not, make known to these poor, weak, loving creatures the full extent of their sorrow, till they had learned that they had at least a more faithful servant, if not a better son than George, to support and comfort them.

Evening after evening, up in his little room with the sack-door, Michael forgot where he was in the mixed delight, pain, and wonder of listening to Nora's voice.

The story of faithfulness, love, and trustful hope was always the same, yet always fresh and marvellous to him.

Sometimes he thought himself favoured above all men to be allowed insight into such a nature, to be permitted to watch it putting forth all its brightest and best treasures of thought, experience, memory, and anticipation, all for the comfort and refreshment of an old and sorely-tried soul, who could only repay it by a wondering gratitude.

At other times, as he came out in the spring mornings, he felt very differently. The thought of Nora, and the beautiful things she had said or read, made him loiter on his way to the mill, and feel so unfit for anything but tender dreaming, that he determined to listen no more, and to

read no more of the books she spoke of as dear friends.

But the charm had become too strong and subtle to break very easily.

It seemed to him that, however long he might banish himself from the sound of that rich voice, and from sight of the familiar and dear face and form, he was really undergoing some kind of painful and injurious starvation till he allowed himself to hear or see her again.

If the effect of yielding to the sweet spell had been all against his works and conscience, Michael would have broken it without hesitation. But he knew this was not so. He knew he was learning much and rapidly, and that good was being confirmed in him which before had been but vague and uncertain.

He learnt that his own submission and sacrifice of his youth and strength to his father had not been the result of simple weakness or indolence of mind, as at times

he had half feared, and as kind people in his own village would have persuaded him it was.

By the light of Nora's goodness and intelligence he was enabled to see, as he had never done before, the soundness and purity of his own aims and wishes, and all his dearest thoughts. This amazed and filled him with delight. Yet, at the same time, his secret sorrow was enlarged and intensified.

It seemed almost terrible that his soul should be gladdened and strengthened by that very truth and tenderness which would make this sweet lady more certain to be crushed by the calamity that he alone knew of.

On some nights, after listening to their talk about George hour after hour, Michael's sleep was full of wild and painful dreams.

Once Mrs. Ambray had been kept up late by the miller's cough. She had seen him at last slumbering peacefully, and was just sitting down for a quiet half hour

with her feet close to the fire, her warm ale beside her, and her Bible on her weary knees.

She was enjoying in this way all that earthly realities and heavenly promises could yield her, and telling her patient old heart that things might be worse, when she heard a smothered cry from Michael's room.

In a moment she was half-way up the stairs with her candle in her hand, listening.

She soon understood he was but sighing and muttering in his sleep, and went in and wakened him; at which Michael was much astonished, and promised to be quiet at once.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MAY MORNINGS.

“ Every fresh and fair tree,
Blowing in the spring,
Apple bright and pear tree
Now are garlanding,

“ Making sweet and shady
All the orchard ways,
Where my pretty lady
Walks o’ sunny days.”

THE next day the miller’s wife alluded to Michael’s dream in a manner that surprised and embarrassed him exceedingly, more especially as she did so before Nora, who had come up to the High Mills in the morning, with some dainty for her uncle’s lunch.

Michael had come to the cottage to ask his master’s will concerning a tire-

some customer whom he could not satisfy. To answer him, Ambray had to go rummaging on an old bill-file, and while he was doing so, Mrs. Ambray began her attack.

“Michael,” said she, “I thought you were a more sensible man. As it is, I’m ashamed of you, that I am.”

Michael smiled and looked gently surprised—not in the least knowing what she meant, but being well used to her bantering.

In truth, the old woman was rather proud of Michael, and often said more to him before Nora than she would have said at other times, just to show off her intimacy with and motherly authority over him.

Michael, who was at heart something of a comedian of that quiet kind that enjoys its own power, which it often uses for its own amusement solely, at once fell into a half imbecile expression, and then took upon that an air of hurt

surprise—all so delicate, that Nora could not for her life have told whether he was or was not acting.

“Ashamed of—of me?” said Michael, his dark eyes cast down, his brows lifted.

“Yes, indeed I *am*,” answered Mrs. Ambray, touching Nora’s foot with her own. “I should ’a’ thought, with that great beard o’ yours, you’d been too much of a man to be sighing and dying all *this* time for a minx of a girl that doesn’t care for you. A fine fellow like you, I *am* ashamed of you. A pretty lot o’ nonsense you must have in your head that you can’t hold your tongue about it when you’re asleep. Ah, you may look! I heard you—with your ‘Could she be quite without mercy and pity for *any* one?’ and your ‘She shall feel at least that I *deserve* her pity.’ Of course it all shows me what you’re after—throwing yourself at that minx’s feet again—and I say it’ll be a very unmanly and silly action. There,

Michael ! I began in fun, but I mean it seriously."

"But," protested Michael, hiding his deepening colour by putting the tips of his fingers to his forehead with an affectation of stupid, puzzled incredulity, "there's some mistake. *Me* talk in my sleep!"

Then suddenly, as if struck by a brilliant idea, his face lighted up, and pointing to the old miller, he exclaimed—

"It must have been the master you heard say all—all that in his sleep."

The miller gave a low growling sort of laugh, and Nora could not help laughing herself to see Michael pretending to shrink back in mortal fear, as Mrs. Ambray seized an old stick in the corner and shook it at him threateningly. Old Guarder, who was always at Michael's heels, began to flounder about, barking beseechingly for peace. The miller looked up and cried,

"Give it him, wife!" and he and Nora

laughed afresh. Mrs. Ambray chased Michael round the room, and there was quite a merry uproar. Ma'r S'one, who had come to summon Nora to dinner, joined in at the door, like a cracked silver bell.

There had not been such mirth in the house since George went away as was caused by Mrs. Ambray's playful attack on Michael.

"Marnin', sir—marnin', ma'am," said Ma'r S'one, still touching his silver forelock, and still keeping on his chirping, grasshopper-like laugh till the water stood in his little blue eyes. "This be's like old times—it be's Ma'rs John. Why, Ma'rs Michael be gett'n just like a son to ye—eigh, missis?"

"When that shall be, Mr. Ma'r S'one," said Michael, dropping suddenly from all his affectation into an attitude of gentle humility and solemnity, and speaking in a voice whose weary tone thrilled with

ecstatic yearning—"when that shall be, there'll be a prouder and a happier man in the world than there ever was before, let him have been who or what he might."

The miller, with his hands on the bill-file, looked at him in astonishment, and a sort of far-off kindness in his eye.

Mrs. Ambray was silent, not daring to take Michael's words as she would have done had the miller not been present.

Nora was more amazed than any one, for she had caught all the solemn passion of the eyes and voice as none else had.

Nora thought of Michael's eye and voice all the way home, and came to the conviction, in her own mind, that this faithful, grateful servant of the miller's must have had one of those hard lives to which ordinary kindness makes a blissful contrast.

There seemed to her no other possible reason for his coming to the *High Mills*,

and settling himself there in such humble and touching content and gratitude. She had, in spite of all her anxiety about George, felt compelled to think of Michael and his ready sympathy and goodwill; and her first suspicion as to what it meant had been an unjust one.

She thought that he must have some idea (she could not understand exactly what) of ingratiating himself with them all, and ultimately of renting the mill himself.

His warning about the missing date on George's last letter made her feel very angry with him, and suspect him of wishing to have George's absence and previous silence regarded by them in the worst light.

His confusion before her and avoidance of her all made her suspect that he knew himself to be guilty of wishing and working for other ends than the simple good of his employers, as he outwardly seemed to be wishing and working for.

Yet, through all this, there had been times

when Michael's simple honesty of purpose so shone out in his face, that Nora had revulsions of feeling for him, and her eye would brighten upon him, with that irrestrainable and subtle recognition which flashes from one deeply true nature to another in spite of all disguise.

When Michael met one of these involuntary looks, for a moment or two he enjoyed such peace and elation of spirit as he never knew mortal man might feel.

The next minute it would be as a dream, or as the shooting of a star, so quickly gone that the eye could not trust itself in having really seen it.

It was often in vain he tried to comfort himself, in his times of sadness, with the thought of such sweet confidence having existed between Nora and himself for even the space of a lightning flash. Yet sometimes he *could* recall it, and all the delight it had caused him would rush over him again and make him pause in his work,

trembling and unable to keep the moisture from his eyes or the smiles from his lips.

When he was at work in the miller's garden, Nora had more than once come upon him with this look on his face.

Remembering what Mrs. Ambray had told her about Michael's supposed love-story, and the words he had said in his sleep, Nora smiled to herself when she saw him so elated, and was touched by the strength of his hope.

She often told her aunt that she doubted the wisdom of her throwing such discouragement on the idea they both thought Michael had of being yet reconciled to his false love.

But Mrs. Ambray was merciless on the matter.

"Don't tell me, Nora!" she would answer. "A fine fellow like that to allow a girl to play with his feelings in such a way! But, I always tell you, you don't know Michael yet, or you wouldn't talk so.

Besides being what he is, he gets more and more of a scholar every day. I only wish poor George had ever been as fond of his books ; but I'm sure it was as if all his schooling went for nothing but making him dislike the sight of a book afterwards."

The good soul little knew what heartaches these comparisons she was always making between the two young men gave poor Nora.

Michael's life at the High Mills was to her only too often a silent, gentle, but most saddening reminder of what George's had never been. It almost seemed that he had been sent there to teach her the bitter lesson—how blind love could be, how blind her own had been.

Thus Michael's presence in the fields and lanes and mill, and in the humble home she so loved, had a sorrowful influence over her, though the presence was to all appearance so bright and cheering.

She believed him to be quite innocent

of meaning to cause this effect on her, and he was so, and often wondered what a strange, steadfast, almost defying gaze that she sometimes fixed on him could mean. The truth was, such looks were nothing but the answers Nora's sad eyes involuntarily gave to the things Michael's life taught her about George.

At the times they fell on Michael, her faithful heart was saying, "And if all this was so—if George is proved a thousand times more faulty—yet, will that alter my love for him?"

But Michael not dreaming of the truth, was penetrated to the quick by these looks. He would, after meeting one of them, shut himself in the mill and sit swaying to and fro on the lower steps, his hands locked in each other as he muttered,

"She sees—she sees something!"

Sometimes he would grope his way at once to where George's little mirror hung, and gaze into it with blank questioning, as

if he almost expected to see that certain fainting, yearning eyes had left their reflections in his own, and that Nora had recognized them there.

The spring continued fine. The children came up in troops to the mill-field to look after their floral types, the daisies. The beauty of Michael's new world increased around him with such soft but marvellous speed, that often when he came in the morning to look out at the mill window, he would, after his first glance at the earth, push back his cap, murmuring aloud some word of wonder, and throwing upward, as if straight into God's eyes, a smile of irrepressible lowly, but full-hearted congratulation, as intensely real as that with which some humble workman in a great sculptor's studio might turn to his master after beholding a night's progress of the inspired hand.

Nora, whose night rests grew more brief

as George's absence and silence strengthened, of ten saw Michael thus.

Her early walks were through the miller's garden, because it was the only spot she felt belonged to the Ambrays, by right of possession as well as justice, and it seemed to her the centre of all the spring's loveliness.

Here Michael every morning met her, or watched her from the mill terrace, and took to his trembling heart great hoards of joy and sorrow—vast enough to last a lifetime.

He never quite knew what that morning vision was to him till there came a run of rainy days to deprive him of it.

Then the mill seemed a prison indeed, and all life a weary penance.

CHAPTER XXV.

A PORTENTOUS VISITOR.

“Death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

PROVERBS.

A WEEK of wet weather, with scarcely a gust of wind from Monday to Saturday, had improved neither Ambray's cough nor his temper.

Michael was beginning to look habitually scared and downcast at his approach, and at the sound of his voice.

On Saturday evening, more as an excuse to escape from the cottage than from any other motive, Michael pretended to remember that a hinge of one of the mill windows was loose, and might be letting in the damp if left over Sunday.

It had just ceased raining when he went out, but all the world looked as if it could never dry up and brighten again; and the mill had a stark, dead stillness and lifelessness about it by no means cheering to a miller's eye.

Michael entered and went up to the stone floor, where he stood looking out half vacantly from the window of which he had spoken.

He had pushed it open, and was watching the smoke rising, or rather being held down by the damp as it came from the chimneys of Buckholt Farm.

He had been standing there for nearly ten minutes, not thinking so much as being overgloomed by thoughts that came, like the clouds passing above him, without any working of his mind.

There had been no sound since he stood there but the water dripping from the mills and the pale trees; and now he was startled by hearing a loud bark

from Guarder ; which was immediately answered by a bark from another dog, and then there was a noise, as if challenger and challenged rolled over on the stones together.

Michael looked down from the window. He did not see the dogs, but he saw a figure walking along on the grass by the side of the path, and after his first glance at it he fell back a step or two, and stood watching its approach.

His own face had changed in that moment—had lost its look of sadness and vague foreboding, and taken on it the blank, breathless air of one confronted suddenly by a new and an unexpected calamity.

The figure came too near for Michael any longer to see it.

The bell fastened to the ground-floor door rang loudly ; an instant after he heard the lifting of the latch.

Michael turned and looked at the open-

ing in the floor where the ladder was, and breathed hard.

He knew his delay must be but momentary; he *must* go down, whoever or whatever awaited him. That was Ambray's door at which the summons had come; he was Ambray's servant; there was no help for him. He was a stranger: there were none to take his part.

His eyes, turning slowly and heavily about in a despairing search for aid, fell on the grindstone.

He went and stood before it, and looked down at it, and the panic and despair in his eyes softened and kindled to sorrow and passion.

Without moving his lips, and while keeping his eyes, misty, and burning, and still, cast upon the stone, he pleaded mutely with God.

Was the stain which his hands had innocently brought upon this stone, and which none saw but him, *not*, after all, to

be ground out by his hands, though he was willing to make that work the aim and end of his life?

Had he not for this purpose deserted, in their old age, his father and mother? And had any one seen the pathos of Michael's eyes as he set this deed before his Maker, he might well have believed these two to be little less than angels, instead of being the most selfish old couple in the world, as in truth they were.

Had he not been patient since he came here, and was his patience and was all his work to go as nothing?

Had the end indeed come? Was Ambray to hear all now—this day—this evening; was his fury to come upon him in this dull rainy light, while the mills were standing still, and every one's door was closed on the drenched world?

CHAPTER XXVI.

GEORGE'S MODEL.

“ This man's brow, like to a title leaf,
Foretells the nature of a tragic volume.”
SHAKSPEARE.

SLOWLY, and with a certain faint trustfulness in his face, Michael at last approached the opening, set his heel on the ladder, and went down.

He did not pause an instant in the grinding-room, or on the dressing-floor, where he threw one quick glance at the sketches on the bin, but went on down the broader steps till he came close to the open door and the person who had admitted himself.

The visitor stood with his hand still

on the latch, and his face turned in the direction from which Michael came; though his eyes were not looking in the same direction, but were turned to the ground with an attentive expression.

He was an old man, of medium height, dressed in patched and ragged clothes, the appearance of which a thorough drenching had not improved. He had a long white beard, and a high forehead, and was superficially venerable looking, but to eyes that rested on his face many moments, it was evident he was not wanting in the low-cunning and brute strength of nerve natural to the born vagrant.

His blindness—for Michael knew it was this affliction which caused him to keep his eyes on the ground while his face was lifted towards the steps—his blindness, no doubt, kept him unaware of how plainly his mouth revealed the half pitying contempt with which he regarded

the world in general. Why, it was difficult to tell.

All that was unpleasant in the old man's face struck Michael now for the first time.

When he had seen that face before—the only occasion on which he ever had seen it before, it was under a flaring gas-lamp, in a crowd—and all that had struck him in it then was its age—its white beard, its blind eyes rolling and straining in their sockets in helpless and yet awful anger—he had seen it thus, and for one minute only, and the image of it had never quite left him since. He had never wished it to leave him. He had cherished it in his memory that he might say to himself, when he grew faint-hearted and sick of soul over that minute's history, “Could *any* man have looked on this blind face, and stayed his hand just then?”

Would the old man know him? He

had heard his voice that night, and Michael knew the wonders of blind men's memories.

The old man, far too dignified to lift his hat, pushed it further off his forehead, and assuming a proud meekness of voice as well as some vague sort of emotion, inquired—

“Sir, do I—do I stand before—Mr. Ambray?”

“No, Mr. Ambray is not in the mill,” Michael answered without hesitation, then watched, searched the face before him with patient intentness for any sign of recognition of his voice.

He saw none. The blind man was evidently aware of something that made his senses very attentive over the voice itself while it spoke, and for an instant or two over the recollection of it when it had ceased speaking.

This, however, might be his habit when hearing, as he must so often have heard,

voices which perplexed him for the moment through their resemblance to other voices.

Not the least curiosity or excitement followed his very careful study of Michael's voice and its vibration.

Having learnt that the master of the High Mills was not present, he became less ceremonious. Letting go the latch, he stepped briskly in and took off his hat, and shook the wet from it in Michael's face.

"He'll be here some time to-night, old Ambray, won't he—eh?" he asked, rubbing his knuckles, which, while shaking his hat about, he had knocked against a shaft.

"No, he won't," answered Michael.

Again there was the same attentiveness over the voice while it spoke, and after it had spoken; and again the same lack of excitement followed the consideration.

He put his hat on, and Michael was half

hoping, half fearing, he would go without making known his object in coming there.

But the old man, after feeling about, touched a sack of flour, on which he immediately seated himself, wet as he was, with a grunt of satisfaction.

Michael only wished he had been an utter stranger, that he might give him his opinion upon this proceeding.

"You Ambray's man, eh?" inquired the blind tramp, adjusting himself comfortably on his yielding seat.

"I am, and I am going to the house. Can I take the master any message?"

"No, thank yer, young man. Must see him. Must see him. Come another day. I'll have a rest now. So this is a mill. Never was in one before."

If he were never to be in one again, Michael thought, so much the better. "I like the smell of it," said his unwelcome visitor, lifting his nose and sniffing vigorously. "By-the-by, where's my dog? Just

look out and see, will yer? Here! Jowler! Jowler!"

Before Michael had made up his mind whether to obey this command or not, a miserable animal, who looked as if he had a share of all the cares of the world, rushed in with a string attached to his collar, and entangling his legs as he ran.

"Come, Jowler," said his master with unaffected feeling, "come and let us see if that clumsy country brute hurt you. You shud keep that beast chained up," he added to Michael, as he carefully felt Jowler all over; "he flew out very savage upon Jowler, and I'll let yer know, my man, if he'd a hurt him it ud bin as much as his life's worth. A retriever—yours *is* a retriever, ain't he? Well, you've just to ask and pay to get another, exactly like him; but I'd like to know the name by which you'd find another such as Jowler."

As Michael could not deny the difficulty

of such an undertaking, he made no answer.

"Your young master's at home now, ain't he?" asked the blind man suddenly.

"*Who?*" said Michael involuntarily, and understanding what was meant the instant he had said it.

"Young Ambray—your master's son—George Ambray—he's at home here now—eh—ain't he?"

Michael laid his hand on the shaft, and looked steadily at the blind face.

There was a world of covert meaning in it—a world of secrecy and cunning; but Michael drew from it, in spite of this, the belief that the question had been put in faith—that the man was really ignorant as to the thing he had asked about.

From that moment he drew freer breath. Why, he asked himself, should he fear this man, if he neither remembered meeting him that night nor knew of what had happened since?

Why was he here, then, inquiring for Ambray? No doubt to bring some charge against George. If this should be so, he must keep the man at all hazards from meeting Ambray.

For the next few moments Michael suffered a great contempt for himself for having thus been overwhelmed with fears for his own safety, and keeping his eyes closed to what might prove danger to the name which he had sworn to keep as unsullied as he might.

Was it selfishness or great unselfishness that made Michael feel suddenly cheerful and courageous when he found he had to do battle on George's account instead of his own? It was a question Michael found himself unable to answer when he thought of it some hours after the mill was closed and he had gone home.

After considering a little while, and looking with puzzled eyes upon the blind man and his dog, as they settled them-

selves more at their ease on his sack of flour, Michael thought the best thing he could do would be to try and remove the impression of extreme disrespect and inhospitality his silence must have given.

"Might you have been born blind, now," he inquired, "or was it an accident?"

"Accident! no, thank yer, young man. No, I'm happy to say I'm a so born. Don't know nothing about sight at all. Never seed in my life."

"Well," said Michael, trying to keep his patience as his saturated guest stretched himself on the flour sack, pommelling it to make a comfortable place for his ragged elbow, "it's a blessing to be contented, certainly."

"Contented! Why, I wouldn't have sight at no price; it ud be like a hextra arm or somethink o' that kind—I shouldn't know what to do with it. Here, p'r'aps you'd like to have a look at my stiffikit."

While Michael was wondering what on

earth that might be, the blind man drew from his pocket a small parchment roll, which having untied he held out to him.

“There,” said he, as Michael took it; “I wears that ’ere round my neck, but most folks in London might be as blind as me for the notice they takes on it. Not as your country bumpkins are much better. They will read it, it’s true, stand before yer, a concealin’ of yer from the public thorerfare, and spell it out to the last letter, then walk away as coolly as if they’d bin a readin’ it on a dead man’s tombstone.”

Meanwhile Michael was reading on the card, written in a schoolmaster-like hand, the words, “Christian charity is solicited on behalf of Richard Bardsley, born blind, who at the age of seventy-three walked from York to London, where he waits his end in the full reliance that his generous-hearted fellow-creatures of this city will not see him starve.”

"And you find Jowler a pretty fair guide?" asked Michael, venturing to pat the queer head as he returned Mr. Bardsley his card.

"Well, yes," he answered, turning towards Jowler, who was showing the whites of his eyes as he lifted them to his master with an expression which seemed to implore that he would please say the best he could of him; "well, yes, leavin' out o' the question one or two little failin's which all sight-gifted natur', human and otherwise, is invariably addicted to—and namin' which I must, I really must"—shaking his head at Jowler, who gave a little whine, and twisted himself as though he knew well enough something not altogether pleasant was being said of him, and he entreated his character might be spared as much as possible—"must specify POUNCING as the most wicious, and apt to trip a person up unawares, specially when it's after a sparrer on the edge of a curb-

stone, or a rat in the bottom of a ditch. I might mention fixin' his mind on perticler streets, and always tugging in them perticler directions, as ilconvenient to a person who happens to have a will of his own likewise ; but tugging is a ilconvenience only, pouncing is a wice—a wice !” And Mr. Bardsley shook his stick at Jowler with one hand, while he felt a large bump on his forehead with the other.

As Jowler looked depressed, and gave a melancholy yawn, after this account of him, his master felt it incumbent on him to put his hand in his pocket and draw forth and show to Michael the little money-box he usually carried, and which was heavy enough when holding ever so few coppers, Bardsley assured him, to try the teeth and temper of any dog living.

“And what is more, sir,” said Bardsley, “there is a haction of Jowler’s life, which did ought to ’a’ won for him a respect above

coppers, as makes the box heavy about little, and *is* trying to his teeth. It is a haction I should have had recorded on the stiffikit, only the young man as wrote the present stiffikit in this here beautiful hand was caused, by circumstances over which he had no control, to leave the country—that is to say, sir, he was transported for forgery; and I was afeard as two different handwritin's on the stiffikit might look unprofessional, consequently Jowler's haction is still between hissself and me and the Almighty. It was a time, sir, when bad luck did seem like a bloodhound as 'ud tasted our blood and meant to have the last drop. My little grandchild had come into the world a few hours or so, and was a crying at it still with all her might and main. My poor son, a so-born like myself, was a waitin' on her and her mother, and blubbin' with joy as his little child was born to see, which she were, sir, and with sorrer as she shud see

such trouble in the beginning. I lay on a mat in the corner, racked with rheumatis, and Jowler hard by, a growlin' out now and then in his sleep with hunger. Not a crumb had any of us had for more hours than would be credited. Every mornin' since I 'ud bin bad had that there dog stood waitin' with the box in his mouth a tryin' to coax me out. His own feelin's taught him how badly money was wanted in the box, for he had always been used to bite short when it was empty. His respect for the box, though, is nothing in regard to his respect for the stiffikit; for seeing people stand and stare at it *afore* they drop money in the box makes him naturally look on that as the most important. He wouldn't by no means let me go out without it, as I used to be goin' to do sometimes in my flurry of mind when my poor son's wife was in her tantrums. He'd go back and stand at the head o' my bed, where the stiffikit

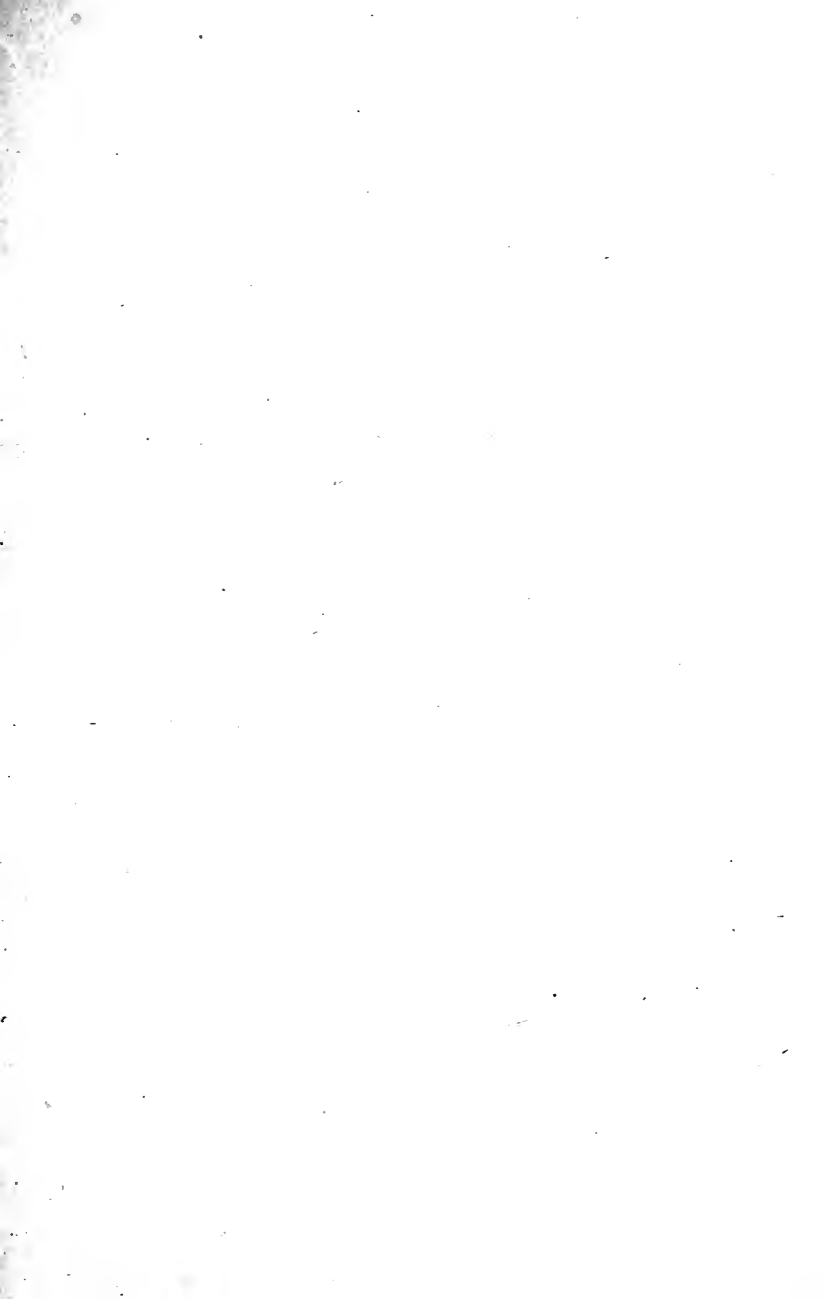
was hung on the knob, and there wait till I come and took it down and put it round my neck. On this mornin' I'm speakin' of he wakes up all of a sudden, gits the box, brings it to the head of the bed, and sits looking up at the stiffikit, and giving little pitiful howls. Presently he begins makin' jumps at it. Then it all came to me what he was after. 'Come here, old boy,' says I; 'have yer own way, and the Lord guide yer.' So I twisted the stiffikit string round his neck short, and he dashed out. He hadn't been gone a quarter of a hour before he came back tearing like mad, rattling something in the box, and the stay-lace woman, and the match gal, and two or three more from the steps where I used to sit, comin' up the stairs after him to tell me how he come there, and how they all knowed old Bardsley was in trouble."

"Well done, Jowler," cried Michael, patting him, "*he* carry coppers; why, he

deserves to have nothing but gold in his box to the end of his days."

"Come, old boy, we must be on the tramp, or little missis 'ull wonder what's come of us. Well, young man," he added, turning to Michael as he took Jowler's string, "I shall look in on yer master agen on Monday. Now, Jowler, not there. No pouncing, you rascal! Out, sir, out!"

END OF VOL. I.



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